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TRAVEL WRITING SAMPLER: THAILAND

A

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty

of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Jennifer Dickson, B.A.

Fairbanks, Alaska

August 1999

TRAVEL WRITING SAMPLER: THAILAND

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Abstract

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"Travel Writing Sampler: Thailand" is a collection of articles and essays employing three different approaches to travel writing: straightforward overview of a place; information-oriented travel article; and personal essay travel narrative. The thematic focus of this collection is travel experiences in Thailand. Part One examines the evolution of the genre of travel writing. Part Two gives the reader an overview of Thailand. Part Three includes four information-oriented articles. Part Four offers examples of personal essay travel narratives. After a review of the literature in this field, I have concluded that successful travel writers balance elements of the information-oriented article and the personal essay travel narrative. Effective, lively travel writing combines *the place* being written about and *the self*— of the writer and traveler.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

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Part One: Overview of the Field— "Mapping the World of Travel Writing"

Then and Now

These days, frontiers are hard to find. All the continents have been mapped, all the tiny islands accounted for. Readers rolls their eyes at travel titles promising even the most remote destination. "Been-there, done-that" is the attitude *du jour*. And, for a contemporary travel writer, this means hard work.

Explorers— the first "travel writers"— had it easy. All they had to do was cross an uncharted ocean, make notes in the ship's log, and stumble ashore, where another frontier awaited. The diaries, letters, and logs from explorers' journeys enthralled readers with detail of new lands, new civilizations, and always, the promise of more.

To purists, this earliest form of travel writing is the essence of the craft. All of the elements are present: the quest— frontier; an epic journey from Point A to B; then the story of arrival. Explorers-as-travel-writers had it made, with accounts of indigenous people, exotic geographies, and the challenges and surprises of a difficult journey.

Throughout its history, travel writing seems to have offered readers two things: information and excitement. Exploration literature that was used as the basis for further ethnographic study attests to the information-value of travel writing. "Anthropologists have never ceased relying heavily on the travelers' memoirs as sources of information about peoples whose cultures were damaged or destroyed" (Liebersohn, 1996, p. 627). And, that popular travel writers including and Tim Cahill, Bruce Chatwin, and Paul Theroux, cite exploration literature in their own travel accounts (e.g., Cahill, 1996, 1997;

Chatwin, 1977, 1987, 1989; Theroux, 1992,) reminds us that even contemporary writers draw on early accounts of frontier to excite their readers.

But, apart from citing the explorers, where can today's travel writers go, now that all of the world has been accounted for?

> Some pundits believe that writers have run out of terrain— that every conceivable scrap of geography has been chronicled. Others say that jet propulsion coupled with mass communications...means that there is no such thing as a far-flung corner of the world. Or that the entire notion of the exotic simply doesn't exist nowadays (Kennedy, 1993, p. 71).

What appear to be the basic elements of travel writing— information and excitement, descriptions of journey and place— are timeless, unlike the means and nature of travel itself. Thanks to sophisticated transportation and the globally pervasive cultural influence of the West, even the hinterlands are no longer so hinter.

The absence of frontier, however, has not put travel writers out of business. In fact, travel writing is more popular than ever. *Publisher's Weekly* warns aspiring travel writers that the industry is "combative" and "brutally competitive" (Dahlin, 1997, p. 41). Successful travel writers have evolved and prospered, both in book publishing and in magazine/newspaper writing since the days of their forbears, the explorers. Of course, they still seek new territory; but where they look has changed.

It seems that modern travel writers have two options: create physical "frontier" by manufacturing challenge in a given journey or place (e.g., O'Hanlon, 1988; Theroux, 1992; Cahill, 1997), or create personal "frontier" by reflecting on the travel experience (e.g., Johnson, 1993; Theroux, 1992). These two options are not mutually exclusive, and some of the most successful travel writers (e.g., Cahill, 1997; Maugham, 1930; Theroux, 1992; Twain, 1871) do both.

The New Explorers: Making Things Difficult

Unlike explorers' intrinsically impelling travel narratives, today's travel writing is a carefully crafted product. The journeys being chronicled are infused with hardship to keep armchair travelers from simply closing the book and switching on the television. That the frontier must now be manufactured "has shaped much of the travel writing currently being produced...in order to travel in the world as it exists today, the traveler...must often create artificial obstacles" (Krist, 1993, p. 595).

Early examples, such as Twain's *Roughing It* (1871), show journeys becoming ever more "highly idiosyncratic" owing to the "requirement of inconvenience" (Krist, 1993) faced by post-frontier travel writers. Evolution of this trend toward manufacturing challenge has compelled writers to drag themselves through jungles (O'Hanlon, 1988), endure six thousand miles of train travel (Theroux, 1975), and so forth, all for the sake of making things difficult for themselves and for the armchair pleasure of their readers.

"Contemporary travel writing still offers the principal virtues that have always characterized the form— including the giddy, beneficial jolt to the system that comes of experiencing, albeit vicariously, the physical and psychological dangers that travel inevitably entails" (Krist, 1993, p. 593).

Today's renowned travel writers, like Theroux (e.g., 1992) and Cahill (e.g., 1997), are expert obstacle-seekers (and, not coincidentally, best-selling authors). They are renowned for their writing as well as for overcoming their self-styled challenges: paddling the Pacific or spearfishing in Peru. Yet, no matter how strenuous the travel experience, the subtext of this type of travel narrative often chronicles a journey to the other hinterland: the personal frontier.

Expressions of Self

In traveling, writers are mapping constantly. Their charts tell them not what is left of *the* frontier, but what is left of *their* frontier. Do I know what it's like in Antarctica? How are strangers welcomed in Afghanistan? What does "real" Chinese food taste like? Could I ever pass for a Swede? Have I been to Timbuktu?

Travel narratives in which authors document not only journey and place but their own personal frontier continue to grow in popularity. Authors like Diane Johnson (e.g., 1993) and Paul Theroux (e.g., 1992), whose travel accounts are "expressions of self against the background of the world" (Krist, 1993, p. 598) give equal time to the place and the self. They consider philosophical issues like the meaning of one's journey, the

nature of travel (e.g., Johnson, 1993), the role of the travel writer (Theroux, 1975, 1992), and so on.

Mark Twain and W. Somerset Maugham are two grandfathers of travel writing whose work pre-dates the current explosion of travel books on the market. However, even their books, written long after any true exploring was possible, give readers insight into the "self" of the author. They reveal the nascent trend toward combining traditional (and once largely third-person) travel accounts with the personal reflections of the author.

Twain's self-revelation in the seminal travel book *Roughing It* (1871) takes the form of an ongoing commentary about how he *feels* as he journeys to the western United States and the Hawaiian Islands. While his journey took him to what may have been the last of the United States' frontier, the reader can already detect the trend toward embellishing the place and the journey with expressions of self. Twain's episodic narrative is thick with physical descriptions of everything he saw, heard, tasted, smelled, and touched. Furthermore, Twain's "self" is as much a character in *Roughing It* as the places he writes about.

Maugham's *The Gentleman in the Parlour: A Record of a Journey From Rangoon to Haiphong* (1930) demonstrates the increasing level of self-imposed challenge among travel writers, as well as the presence of "self" in the story. Seeking hinterland, Maugham trekked through the jungles of southeast Asia in the 1920s to find material for what would become a travel writing classic.

While the author's circuitous route between Burma and China (an early example of self-styling challenge, perhaps) frequently led him through remote jungle villages, Maugham spent at least some of his time in the cities: Bangkok, Haiphong, etc. The Asian cities he visited were as far from "frontier" as his hometown of London. And, of course he realized that Asia had been mapped long before him. So, why did he bother? Because for Maugham, as for many travel writers, the frontier is as inside the self as it is "out there."

Two "Species" of Travel Writer

"There are...two distinct species of contemporary travel writers— those whose journeys are primarily expressions of the self against the background of the world, and those whose journeys are more outwardly projected investigations *of* the world" (Krist, 1993, p. 598). Authors expressing themselves against the background of the world represent the majority of popular travel writers. They still employ the new trick of manufacturing challenge, but what they do best is explore personal frontier.

Paul Theroux (1975) has written that the "big trip" is simply a roundabout way of coming home. Diane Johnson (1993) learned that overcoming danger while traveling is gratifying and cathartic. Just as important as teaching armchair travelers about places of the world, the personal form of travel writing imparts to readers lessons, like Theroux's and Johnson's, that can only be learned as a result of travel.

Some of the finest examples of the personal form of travel writing appear in the series published by Travelers' Tales.

True to the tradition of travel writing since the explorers, the "tales" in this series do more than just describe the landscape. They chronicle journeys, places, challenges, and surprises while informing and exciting the audience. The stories in this series also offer an increasingly personal view of the travel experience, mapping for the reader places within the world and the self. They describe cross-cultural interaction, functioning like informal ethnographies (e.g., Baker, 1997; Coburn, 1997; Lewis, 1997), they deconstruct stereotypes (e.g., Hollinger, 1997; O'Reilly, 1998; Vreeland, 1997), and they teach readers about distant places that are nonetheless part of our "global village" (Matthews, 1998; Orr, 1995; Rember, 1997). Examples of the increasingly intimate nature of travel writing found in *Travelers' Tales* are simply the contemporary extension of a perspective from which Twain was writing over a century ago.

"Rich personal odysseys" (Zinsser, 1990, p. 16), like Bruce Chatwin's in *In Patagonia* (1977), guide readers through places and personalities. An account of Chatwin's travel in the South American states of Patagonia, the title of *In Patagonia* illustrates where the author traveled. But, that's not what the real story is about. How the history, myth, and culture fascinate Chatwin on a personal level comprise the story. *In Patagonia* is a journey to all the historical themes (e.g., the mechanics of revolution) that Chatwin wants to visit.

Twenty years after *In Patagonia* (1977), the personal travel narrative has evolved further yet. Some authors plunge deep into the psyche, deconstructing the very nature of travel while on the road, like Diane Johnson in *Natural Opium* (1993). Some take leave of city-life and domestic doldrums to paddle the Pacific, like Paul Theroux in *The Happy Isles of Oceania* (1992). Some, like Nick Bantock's whimsical *Griffin & Sabine* (1991), imaginatively combine travel writing, fiction, and art.

Working within travel writing's traditional boundaries are the latter of the two species: travel writers who exclude the self from the investigation of the world. This category is represented by authors like John McPhee and Jan Morris, according to Krist (1993), who presents *Coming Into the Country* (McPhee, 1991) as an example. In his investigation of Alaska, McPhee offers an account in which "the author's personality is virtually negated, distilled to a sympathetic, sometimes ironic, always attentive observing eye" (p. 598). Similarly, Morris gives the reader a selfless portrait of place in *Hong Kong* (1993), "a vivid, almost breathless celebration, a rhapsodic portrait that needs no imposed high jinks to keep the interest level up" (Krist, 1993, p. 598).

What each "species" of travel writer offers the reader varies. The form that suits an individual depends on the degree of "self" he or she prefers in a travel narrative. Those readers seeking unadorned factual information about a place are likely to gravitate toward authors like McPhee and Morris. Conversely, readers seeking to learn not only the facts of a place but also the personal impressions and stages of learning that can take place through travel may opt for Theroux, Johnson, Chatwin, and the many others who fall into

Krist's (1993) former category.

The degree of authorial presence in many recent travel narratives has led Dervla Murphy (1992), a travel writer herself, to call travel writing a "non-genre." Given the broad reach and spectrum of travel books on the market, this classification seems accurate. "The travel book...has become a vehicle for conveying any combination of hilarious mishaps, spiritual reflections, political obsessions, ecological crusades, and autobiographical musings so long as the material is set in odd climates and on unfamiliar terms" (Murphy, 1992, p. 126).

A New Writer's Frontier

As a student of travel writing today, who realizes the elastic boundaries of this "non-genre," I feel encouraged to experiment with different forms of travel writing. A diverse canon of travel accounts— from the explorers through the late 20th century— offers rich examples of what is possible within the field of travel writing. With the liberty to fashion my own challenges and to include "expressions of self" in travel accounts, I proceed cautiously, seeking to balance the straightforward account and personal expression.

Dervla Murphy (1992) notes that in striving for a straightforward travel account, many travel writers fail to capture the "immediacy of a place," failing to "be absorbed and influenced by the unfamiliar....To them a country and its people are merely raw material, to be detachedly observed and then fashioned into a book" (p. 129).

While writing articles for newspapers and magazines (which reflect similar trends in travel writing as books) as well travel essays for book anthologies, I have tried to avoid this lack of personal involvement in my stories and subjects. While creating each story, however, I have also been wary of writing too far in the opposite direction: too much "self" in the travel narrative. "A travel book is by its very nature an exercise in first-person narrative....so many first-time writers make the fatal mistake of believing that readers will immediately respond to the character they call *I*" (Kennedy, 1993, p. 71). It seems that the balance writers must find is between *the place* being written about and *the self*— the writer and traveler.

With this said, a distinction must be made between two varieties of self expression in travel writing: writing *about* oneself in a place and writing about a place *through* oneself. The former variety, like the species of writer whose narratives are "primarily expressions of the self against the background of the world" (Krist, 1993, p. 598) is typified by Diane Johnson in *Natural Opium* (1993). Authors like Johnson, who employ the first-person travel narrative as a means to writing about themselves more than the place, explore inner meanings, motives, and stages of growth while traveling. Ostensibly, this variety of self expression could take place almost anywhere, unlike the latter style, in which a place is simply presented from the author's perspective.

At a glance, this variety of first-person narrative may seem undifferentiated from a story *about* the first-person. However, if at the end of the travel narrative, a reader knows more about the place than the "I" who told the story, it can be assumed that the first-

person voice was used as a vehicle for describing the *place* and not the *self*. Of course, many writers (e.g., Cahill, 1996, 1997; Maugham, 1930; Theroux, 1975, 1993) effectively blend these two varieties in their travel narratives, and the degree of self expression is dynamic within given narratives and writing careers.

The following collection of articles and essays represents my experimentation with travel writing in different forms and styles. All of the stories have a central theme: travel experiences in Thailand. *Part Two* is an overview written in the straightforward, journalistic tradition. It is intended to help readers situate themselves in Thailand, which is the setting for all of the following narratives. *Part Three* includes travel articles that have very little authorial presence and are mostly information-oriented. When I use a first-person perspective in *Part Three*, it is a means to describing a place, not necessarily my place in it. *Part Four* features travel narratives that combine place and self. In this section, I use the first-person perspective both ways: to let readers see me in a place (e.g., "Bugged," "Nobody Walks to Khao Yai") and to allow readers a view of a place through me (e.g., "What It's Worth: Retreat From Your Vacation," "Thais Dancing").

Travel Writing Sampler: Thailand is an exploration of the "frontier" of the genre and my place in it. The physical place that I wrote about, however, does not represent a hinterland, which is to say that, like other "new explorers" in the field, I did my best to make things difficult.

Part Two: The Journalistic Tradition— "Inland in Thailand"

Lay of the Land

The tourist brochures don't lie. Thailand's peninsula, furling 500 miles into the azure waters south of Bangkok, is a tropical paradise. The South's balmy beaches and palm-fringed islands lure R&R-seekers away from the rest of the country. Although the "Land of Smiles" receives seven-and-a-half million international visitors annually, most of them never leave the beach.

There, "home" is a thatched bungalow with a view of the sun setting over the Andaman Sea. Sunbathing, coladas, and coconut curry complete the exotic dreamscape. Active vacationers may fill out their holidays with snorkeling, diving, rock climbing, or sea kayaking, but most spend their time simply relaxing. For the average visitor to Thailand, the peninsula is the only place to be.

That may be because tropical paradise isn't found anywhere else in Thailand. Resting atop its narrow southern strip of beach, the bulk of this Southeast Asian country is landlocked by Myanmar (Burma), Laos, and Cambodia. On the map, Thailand looks a like a top-heavy lollipop. And, like any candy, the sweetest part isn't the stick.

If you want more than what's in the tourist brochures, head inland to explore Bangkok, the North, the national parks, and *Issan*, Thailand's Northeast.

Braving Bangkok: The Heart of Thailand

Arriving at Bangkok's Don Muang International Airport, the first thing a visitor may notice is the utter urban-ness of this Asian capital. The landscape is a gray haze of skyscrapers, shopping malls, and seven million residents gridlocked in one of the capital's twenty four rush hours.

Through the polluted air, however, it is possible to catch a glimpse of Bangkok's past. The Chao Praya River, gateway to the port of Bangkok twelve miles upstream of the Gulf of Thailand, is the capital's oldest feature.

"The highways of Bangkok are not streets or roads but the river and the canals. Boats are the universal means of conveyance and communication," wrote British envoy Sir John Browning in 1855. More than a century later, the river is still one of the city's major thoroughfares. River ferries and longtail taxis shuttle passengers from one side of town to the other. Canoes set up shop on the water, their captains selling fruits and vegetables to other small-craft passengers, the patrons of Bangkok's famous "floating markets." A day spent exploring the canals and markets of the Chao Praya River is a day spent exploring "old Bangkok."

Remnants of the old city also glitter in the many Buddhist temples sprinkled throughout the capital. The grandest of them all is the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, with its three ancient *chedis* like spired gold liberty bells of gigantic proportion.

Sharing the same 2,000-square-yard corner is the temple's proud next door neighbor: the Grand Palace, once the Thai royal family's own "city within a city." Today, Thailand's King Bhumibol uses only a few palace buildings for special occasions, like coronation ceremonies. Although the Grand Palace won't afford visitors a view of the king, who lives elsewhere, it's a great place to admire royal architecture. Palace structures blend Western and traditional Thai styles, marked by steeply pitched roofs, ornate window and door frames, and teak construction.

The Chao Praya River, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, and the Grand Palace are three of Bangkok's biggest, and oldest, attractions. Others, like a walk through Chinatown and Pahurat, Bangkok's lively Indian community, are must-sees as well.

Just outside of the Delhi-like bazaars of Pahurat, visitors can catch a *tuk-tuk*, the "Made in Thailand" motorized rickshaw, to Lumphini Park. A welcome reprieve from a day of Bangkok sightseeing, the park is a green oasis in the middle of the cement city. Breathing in clean, relatively unpolluted air from a pond-side picnic spot, it's easy to imagine a younger, more angelic Bangkok.

Krung Thep, meaning "City of Angels," is what Thai people call their capital. For the visitor, it's a place where amenities exist in ungodly excess: a myriad of markets and haute couture boutiques, restaurants in the tens of thousands, hundreds of cheap guesthouses, and more than a dozen five-star hotels, including the legendary Oriental, where travel writer Somerset Maugham was laid up with a bout of malaria in the 20s.

But, Bangkok's infrastructure is straining under its own weight. The skyscraping office buildings constructed during Thailand's economic boom in the late 80s can't house the inundation of its job-seeking rural migrants since the economic bust in 1997. The city suffers from excessive pollution, flooding in the rainy season, and a sin city sheen that reflects "supply and demand" all too clearly.

Bangkok is a 220-square-mile maze that leads some visitors to the quintessential Southeast Asian city of yore, and others to little more than a pigeon-less New York during a heat wave. Yet what every visitor finds after even a single day in *Krung Thep* is the miracle of "old" and "new" Bangkok, side by side, as if sharing the heart of Thailand.

North to the Past

A train ticket north from the "angelic" heart of Central Thailand is a slow, inexpensive way to cool down from too much city heat. From Bangkok, the railroad bisects the massive Central Plains region. Trains traverses past rice fields and a blur of tiny villages, each with its own colorful temple. Within eight hours comes relief: the hills, then mountains, of the North.

Upcountry is where original Thailand (called *Siam* until 1939) still exists. Back in the thirteenth century, in the forested hills of the North, the first Thai kingdoms were settled: Chiang Mai, Chiang Saen, Lanna, Nan, and Sukothai. Some of these original settlements can still be seen— the crumbling brick walls and eroding stone Buddha images

attest to a long Siamese history that has always remained free of colonial rule.

Five hundred miles from Bangkok, Thailand's northern borders meet the dense forests of Myanmar (formerly Burma) and the Maekhong River at Laos. This area forms the famed "Golden Triangle." Opium production— the source of the triangle's fame— is strictly prohibited in Thailand. Even without the poppy fields, life up North is mellow.

Northerners take life easy. It's as if they move and speak just as slowly as the pace of their history. Waiting in traffic in the rural north means listening to a bicycle rickshaw driver tapping his toes as a water buffalo crosses a narrow dirt road. Even the clock relaxes at Thailand's higher latitudes— it's a phenomenon called "Thai time," which can be anywhere from thirty minutes to three hours later than what your watch reads.

Chiang Mai, the cool, clean "Rose of the North," has a population of about 200,000. An accessible, friendly alternative to overheated Bangkok, Chiang Mai welcomes only half as many visitors.

Sightseeing in the North is less of a production than in Bangkok, where traffic and sheer numbers take some of the fun out of being a tourist. Visiting sights around Chiang Mai is easy when you go via *songthaew*, a covered pick-up truck that acts as a shared taxi. Must-sees are few: *Doi Suthep*, a hillside temple in Chiang Mai and a couple of the modest temples outside of the city, in small towns like Lamphun and Pasang.

Venturing beyond city limits gives visitors a flavor of the rural lifestyle, primarily supported by rice, fruit, and flower farming, that many Northerners live. And, in tiny hamlets like Pasang (pop. 3,000), there's certainly no traffic.

Back in Chiang Mai, the promise of "adventure" and "cultural experience" lures many visitors to join the "hill tribe treks" offered by a hundred or so different outfits. Hill tribes like the Hmong, Karen, Lisu, and Akha, are big business in Northern Thailand. Trekking companies send fleets of curious, well-meaning tourists to hill tribe villages (some real, some staged) every day. Many companies are unscrupulous in their dealings with both the tourists and the hill tribes, however, serving the former like spoiled rich children and treating the latter like zoo animals. *Caveat emptor*: authentic experiences cannot be bought.

A few close-to-the-real-thing hill tribe treks are available in less touristed areas like Um Phang near the western border. To study hill tribe traditions, religion, history, visit the Tribal Research Institute or the Hilltribe Education Center, both in Chiang Mai.

A National Treasure

While off on hill tribe treks in the North, many visitors miss out on Thailand's most widespread and underrated attractions: its national parks. Monsoon rainforests, exotic wildlife (in dwindling numbers), and a break from the beaten path offer plenty of inspiration for appreciating the plight of Thailand's natural wonders.

Historically, Thais have revered and taken respite in nature. Even today, the land surrounding Buddhist temples, or *wats*, is a sanctuary for monks, worshipers, and animals alike. In the 13th century, Thailand's King Ramkamhaeng (who also created the original Thai alphabet) set aside the first official preserve.

But as the country grew, hunting, logging, development, and pollution put the squeeze on its natural resources. The National Parks Act of 1961 arrived just in time to protect thirteen percent of the country's land and sea area. Modeled on the U.S. National Park Service system, the Royal Forestry Department of Thailand has parlayed its precious thirteen percent into seventy-seven national parks (fifteen of them are in the water, protecting fragile coral colonies).

Thai people often refer to "the former time," when their country wasn't so consumed by the current rate of growth. It's difficult to imagine what the country was like during that era, when the only skyscrapers were towering Northern teaks and the pillared pines of what is currently Nam Nao National Park.

A visit to Nam Nao, located between the country's North and Northeast regions, may give visitors a glimpse how the former time may have looked.

Tucked into the pine forests that cover the rolling hills of Thailand's Phetchabun Range, Nam Nao is one of the least-visited and most pristine parks in Thailand. It's a peaceful, 376-square-mile plot of seasonal evergreen forests, stands of dry savanna, and bamboo groves that whisper and rasp when the mountain winds blow. The park is

allegedly home to elephant, barking deer, and the marbled cat, but exotic mammals like these, which literally roamed the country until about World War II, are increasingly threatened by ruthless poachers.

Continued exploitation of Thailand's wild animals— even in protected areas— has decimated their numbers. Some parks (like the country's oldest, Khao Yai, between the Northeast and Bangkok) still boast a healthy wildlife population, but aside from a small number of fellow travelers, visitors are likely to see few mammals.

The country's wildlife isn't the only resource that needs protection. Until the 1940s, forest covered more than ninety per cent of Thailand. Intense (and currently banned) logging and slash-and-burn agriculture have reduced the once-vast forest land to generous official estimates of twenty-five percent. Only about sixteen percent is actually healthy, however, according to the Wildlife Fund Thailand (WFT), an environmental group patronized by Queen Sirikit. Thai citizens and visitors alike hope that royal advocacy of environmental responsibility will save the country from turning, as King Bhumibol has said, "from a land of gardens and rice into a desert."

Ancient and Arid "Issan"

When the King speaks of not letting his country dry up, he may be overlooking the fact that the Thailand's expansive Northeastern region, *Issan*, is already practically a desert due to a lack of rain.

Unlike the wet season/dry season cycle of the North and twice annual double-whammy Southern monsoons, the extreme Northeastern heat leaves its land thirsting for water. *Issan* gets so little rain that its farmers, who make up the largest share of the workers in the region, can only wrench one rice crop per year (versus two elsewhere in Thailand) from their infertile ground. Much of *Issan* is a massive sandstone table called the Khorat Plateau, known locally as the "Plain of Tears."

Although the soil is inhospitable, travel in the Northeast is anything but. Yet, only two percent of Thailand's international visitors go to *Issan*. Those who do are rewarded by virtually tourist-free attractions like 182 historic Khmer (that is, ancient Cambodian) temples that link Thailand's Northeast to the most famous Southeast Asian temple, Angkor Wat, just over the eastern border.

A railroad and airlines serve the region in moderately industrial cities like Khorat and Khon Kaen. Also, ease of travel by *songthaew* or bus in the Northeast makes getting out of city limits a cinch, so visitors can explore outlying villages. An eleven baht (about forty-five cents) ticket on public bus No. 1303 goes to Pak Thong Chai, a tiny town outside of Khorat known for its traditional silk weaving.

Twenty miles of country road after boarding the bus in Khorat, you may be the only *farang*— western tourist— at the cultural center's silk-weaving demonstration. After learning about silkworms and the finely spun craft of local silk weavers, you'll know what a bargain you've found in that lovely, ten dollar sarong. You've discovered wearable art.

Fascinating ancient history, skilled craftspeople, low inflation, and the relative absence of a tourist track make *Issan* perfect for visitors brave enough to stray this far from the beaches of Southern Thailand.

Skip the Beach

And, with all there is to see and do in the rest of the country— from braving Bangkok to exploring the rural North, from national parks to path-finding in *Issan*— who needs a tropical paradise?

Part Three: Informational Travel Articles

April Showers: Don't Take It Personally, No One Stays Dry in Chiang Mai

Wanted: Good-humored travelers to participate in the Thai New Year Songkran festival. Age, race, gender not important. Must enjoy getting drenched.

As the April moon waxes full, Thai people grow restless. It's the middle of the hot season, they've waited a lunar year for their favorite holiday, and they're ready for action. People prepare early, assembling buckets, hoses, and pails— any vessel to ring in the new year. It's almost time for *Songkran* festival.

Finally, April 13 arrives. Thai New Year has come. The Buddhist holiday begins. And, it won't end until everyone is soaked.

During Songkran, whether you're walking on the street, driving with the windows down, even sitting on a bus— you're going to get wet. Kids and adults alike stand in wait or cruise in the backs of pick-ups, looking for targets. And everyone, except for the elderly and the clergy, is fair game.

"Water-throwing"— a Songkran tradition— began as a practice of honoring elders and monks. Thai people sprinkled fragrant water over the hands of these revered community members to show respect. This solemn side of Songkran continues today, as does the custom of bathing Buddha images at temples throughout the predominantly Buddhist country.

Outside the temples, however, the Songkran tradition has evolved into airborne liquid zeal, especially on the streets of Chiang Mai.

An oasis in the sweltering heat of the rest of Thailand, Chiang Mai, in the cool, mountainous North, hosts the country's most refreshing Songkran celebration. Even Bangkok city slickers travel more than 450 miles to reach the vibrant New Year's playground. And, well after April 15, the last official day of Songkran, Chiang Mai is saturated still with cool, bucket-toting Thais and *farangs*— foreigners— joining the fun.

In Chiang Mai, there's no way *not* to join the fun. Staying dry simply isn't an option. Unlike many U.S. festivals, Songkran is not limited to corralled crowds of spectators and passing paraders. Take this scene, for example:

A parade of buoyant Thais courses along a thoroughfare in the historic Tha Phae Gate area of the city. Leading the parade is a tassel-footed elephant whose face is painted with blue, green, and yellow swirls. Streetsides are lined with onlookers, most of them as sopping wet as the paraders are after a morning (yes, morning) full of celebrating.

One of the paraders dances out of line and approaches a young *farang* in the crowd. Like many of the other Thais, this parader wears a denim farmer's shirt and a shock of jasmine garlands around his neck. And, of course, he's holding a pail full of water. He gives the young *farang* a flower necklace, then smiles as if to say, "O.K., you know what's next."

She lowers her head; he drenches her. They're both smiling. Although the gesture is, as Thais say, *yen dee*— cool and good— it's also the warmest New Year's blessing in Thailand.

Fact Box:

Practicalities

- ***Getting There***

  Chiang Mai is accessible via Bangkok on a one-hour Thai Airways flight for about US$70, one way. Travelers with more time than money can also take a bus or train. The scenic journey takes eight to ten hours and costs 75 percent less than a flight.

- ***Where to Stay***

  The Tha Phae Gate area and the rest of Chiang Mai's historic "old city" are at the heart of the Songkran action. Bounded by moats and crumbling brick walls, the town is also pulsing with clean, well-priced guesthouses. Nightly room rates are typically less than US$10, and decent, family-run places cost as little as US$3.

  Chiang Mai is a modern city with all the amenities of Bangkok, so it also sports several middle- and high-end hotels. These are located a rickshaw ride from the overflowing action in the old city, but not to worry. Water-toting revelers are everywhere (sometimes where you least expect them), and Songkran isn't over until everyone is soaked.

- ***Resources***

  The Tourism Authority of Thailand (312/819-3990, Chicago; 212/382-2353, New York; 213/819-2990, L.A.; *www.tat.or.th*) publishes a current *Major Events and Festivals* calendar— a useful resource for trip-planners.

- ***Visas***

  American passport holders are granted a free, automatic thirty-day visa upon arrival in Thailand with proof of onward passage. To extend the visa, get in line at any immigration office in Thailand. Or, do a safe, legal, and fun "visa run" over the Thai-Myanmar border bridge at Mae Sai. For more details on the visa run, see "Breakfast In Burma."

- ***Before you leave... dos and don'ts***

  Dos:

  — Pack lightweight, fast-drying casual clothing. Remember that bathing suits, despite Songkran showers, are inappropriate. Thais appreciate modest dress.

  — Read a little (or a lot) about Thailand. The more you know before you go, the more you'll appreciate Thai customs, culture, and holidays, like Thai New Year. A guidebook from the *Lonely Planet* or *Eyewitness* series is a great place to start reading. For something more in-depth, check your local library.

  — Remember to bring along plastic bags for protecting your camera and other water-sensitive belongings while celebrating.

  Don'ts:

  — Don't bother with malaria pills unless you plan on trekking well outside of Chiang Mai. Check the Centers for Disease Control and Protection (CDC) Web pages for Thailand-specific travelers' recommendations for inoculations: *www.cdc.gov.*

  — Don't worry about converting your dollars into Thai baht until you get to Thailand. In Thai cities and provincial capitals, currency exchange offices are virtually everywhere, including in the airports.

Breakfast in Burma

Yes, it sounds like a distant destination for the morning meal, but breakfast in Burma is as easy as crossing a bridge if you're coming from Mae Sai, Thailand.

Mai Sai's location— and a recently opened immigration checkpoint on the Thai-Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) border— makes it a popular place for travelers to hop over for a "visa run," renewing the automatic thirty-day tourist visa granted American passport-holders.

A visa run between Thailand and Myanmar is a perfectly safe, legal, and legitimate way to renew the Thai visa.

While a traditional paper extension of the visa costs at least US$55 and gets you only behind the next person in line at the immigration office, the entire visa run from Mae Sai to Myanmar via Chiang Mai, Thailand's Northern hub city, can be accomplished on an overnight trip that costs less than US$17, including breakfast.

Dollar-spending travelers pay less these days to get around the kingdom (of Thailand, that is), so making a trip out of a visa extension is a fun option for long-term visitors. At the time of writing, US$1 was worth 38 baht, the Thai unit of currency.

Five air-conditioned buses run daily between the Chiang Mai Arcade Bus Terminal and Mae Sai. A one-way trip costs US$4 and takes four to five hours. The bus grinds up and down twisty mountain roads, passing terraced rice fields, thatched bamboo huts, nonchalant water buffaloes, and shades of green from lime to kelly.

Once in Mae Sai, Thailand's northernmost outpost, you'll see the river for which the town is named. On the other side of the tawny water lies Myanmar, a second of the three corners that comprise the "Golden Triangle" formed by Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos.

Check in for the night at a laid-back riverside bungalow. Enjoy the sunset from your balcony while watching life at the Golden Triangle flow past. Nightly room rates at riverfront guesthouses usually run around US$5. A simple, local dinner of steamed river fish and sticky rice is as authentic as it gets and costs less than US$2.

The next morning, walk up the broad, steep stairway to Wat Phra Tat Doi Wao—the Buddhist "scorpion" temple. It's an invigorating one-hundred-stair-climb to the top. Catch your breath as you take in a misty panorama of the Golden Triangle, watch monks leave for their daily alms-rounds, or marvel at the unusual concrete scorpion statue.

Hungry yet? Simply descend the stairs, walk to the checkpoint (foreign travelers must pay a US$5 departure tax to leave Thailand), and cross the bridge into Myanmar.

As for breakfast... go ahead and double up on the *rotis* (sweet pancakes, fried crisp on an outdoor griddle). By crossing the Mae Sai bridge for your 30-day visa extension instead of standing in line for one at the immigration office, you've just saved yourself US$38. And now all there is to do is relax over a cup of coffee and breakfast in Burma.

Issan Cuisine: Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School Dips Into Northeastern Thai Food

Now I will tell you about the delicious food.
It's "som-tam," often eaten for its wonderful taste.
Easy to make— I'll tell you the method, the excellent one:
Buy papaya. Pound chilies and garlic a little bit.
Smells good!
Mix together fish sauce, lemon juice, and sugar— excellent taste.
Add papaya. Don't forget the dried shrimp, tomatoes, and long beans.
Finished already, now move from the kitchen.
Eat with sticky rice, serve some to everyone.
When you smell som-tam, your mouth will water.
Take care not to overeat— you'll get a stomach ache.
With grilled chicken— delicious!

"The *Som-tam* Song," revived by Thailand's Princess Phra Tep from a centuries-old poem, written by a member of the royal staff.

The tools are traditional, the techniques timeworn: bamboo steaming basket, mortar and pestle, tamarind tree chopping block. Cooking Northeastern Thai, or *Issan* food, is simple— often no more difficult than chopping the ingredients.

And what ingredients! Thailand's Princess Phra Tep didn't sing about her favorite *Issan* dish, *som-tam*, without reason. Fresh herbs, fruits, and vegetables make a tangy-spicy-sweet flavor that will rouse any palate to dance.

Of course, a serving of *som-tam* isn't complete without an ample supply of sticky rice. Unlike their relatives in southern Thailand and Bangkok, Northern and Northeastern Thais prefer a glutinous variety of the Asian staple. Steamed rather than boiled, this rice is easy to condense into a ball between the forefingers and thumb (the more confident will simply roll it in the palm), forming an edible utensil with which *Issan* dishes are eaten.

Simple *som-tam* turns into an *Issan* banquet when served with grilled chicken and fresh, raw vegetables. Yet, Northeastern Thais skip the banquet table, preferring something more down to earth. The *khantoke*, a foot-high bamboo pedestal used like a table, is popular anywhere north of Bangkok. Circling the food-crowded tabletop, diners sit on bamboo mats spread on the ground. Meals are leisurely and informal, with plenty of time for conversation.

Although service on the traditional table isn't necessary for enjoying the taste of *Issan* food, it creates a relaxed, communal atmosphere. And, there's another bonus to using the *khantoke*. When the meal is over, the pedestal is removed, dishes and all, giving new meaning to the phrase "clearing the table."

The ingredients and dining style of *Issan* reflect the hardy, unpretentious character of Northeastern Thais, many of whom are closely related related to their neighbors in Laos. Recipes are robust and can be sizzlingly spicy, relying on ingredients like chilies, coriander, and garlic.

Fresh, healthy *Issan* cuisine is as enjoyable to prepare and serve as it is to eat. After mastering the simple technique of making sticky rice, all that's left is becoming acquainted with the traditional tools of the trade.

You can experiment on your own with a reference like *Thailand: The Beautiful Cookbook* (Poladitmontri and Lew, 1992). Or, if you're planning to visit Thailand, learn from a real, live pro: Chef Somphon Nabnian.

A veteran Thai chef, Nabnian demystifies the how-tos of buying, preparing, and eating Thai food— including many *Issan* dishes— at the Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School in Northern Thailand. There, Nabnian offers one-, two-, and three-day courses (in English) to novice and experienced cooks. The course costs less than $75 for three days of instruction and a take-home cookbook.

Nabnian invites groups of up to twenty students into his home each day to prepare such *Issan* specialties as sticky rice, *som-tam*, and spicy minced chicken salad (*laap gai*). Also on the syllabus are standards like *phad Thai*, hot and sour prawn soup (*tom yam goong)*, and three different curry pastes— the flavor foundation of many Thai recipes.

The course also includes a guided tour of the sense-boggling local market. Tables piled with pungent mounds of curry and shrimp paste flank tubs full of tiny, red-hot chilies (the young green ones are actually spicier, explains Nabnian, popping one into his mouth as he grins at stupefied students). Fish, oyster, and soy sauces neighbor bulging burlap sacks of rice, in both plain and glutinous varieties.

Students pore over the produce area: knobbly kaffir limes, strange ginza root formations, fluffy beds of basil, and straight staffs of lemongrass. Even Nabnian lingers, basking in the sights and smells of signature Thai ingredients that punctuate his culinary creations. Thailand's ordinary vegetables deserve attention, too— green-rinded pumpkins, foot-long "snake beans," and tomato-sized eggplants.

Nabnian's market tour also includes a seasonal fresh fruit tasting where students "oooh" and "aaah" over curious fruits that many *farangs*— Westerners— have never seen. The small, hairy-skinned rambutan delights with its sweet, translucent flesh and unexpected coconutty-grape taste. Students marvel at the durian, a football-sized spiky fruit revered by Thais despite its "aroma" (or "stench," depending on your semantics). Durian has a unique consistency, like firm, rubbery custard; its flavor is creamy sweet and slightly almondy. Other fruits are also available for tasting, such as the mangosteen with its majestic cap of four dark green, curled leaves and delectable, pure white inner cloves.

Back at the chef's house— ostensibly, the classroom— further introductions are made. "Thai herbs and spices, these are my students. Students, here are my herbs and spices," says Somphon playfully. He profiles them one by one: hot, hotter, and hottest chili peppers, coriander, kaffir lime, three different types of basil, ginza (similar to ginger), turmeric, lemongrass. Nabnian details culinary, folk, and medicinal uses while his students eagerly scribble notes in their cookbooks.

After the introductions, it's time to get down to the business of cooking. Students are shown into the kitchen. Crowding around the stove is unnecessary because tiered seating gives students a semi-aerial perspective. Everyone can see exactly what Nabnian is doing, step by step.

He chops. He pounds with the pestle. He stirs. No sooner has he begun one dish than he's started the next. Thai cooking is not time-consuming once the ingredients have been prepared, and most dishes are ready to eat within ten minutes.

After Nabnian demonstrates five recipes, the students break for a delicious and filling lunch around several *khantokes* on the cool, pleasant porch. Then they re-enter the kitchen, where the chef whips up a few more dishes including a Thai dessert. These end-of-the-meal treats are simple to make and surprisingly satisfying to the sweet tooth, despite the occasionally unusual ingredients: water chestnuts, beans, shallots, and corn.

If students aren't full following lunch, the second round of feasting on the porch ensures that dinner after class ends is unnecessary. If students do venture out for a meal, you can be sure they'll head straight for Nabnian's hot-spot new restaurant, The Wok.

On each of the three days of the course, Nabnian shares a "secret" recipe not in the student cookbook. Although note-taking is typical among the students, at no time is it more feverish than when Somphon announces, "This recipe is extra— not in the book. Maybe you want to take notes?"

Following are recipes for favorite *Issan* dishes, as well as one of Somphon Nabnian's "secret" recipes (See Appendix). The others are, well, a secret.

Glamour in the Market

Early in the morning, while the mangos and the mangosteens are poised on tables in neat rows, slip out of the sun and under the tin pavilion of a Thai market.

The floor is dirt. There are no walls and scarcely aisles. Everyone just bustles and bumps through what looks, from the air, like a dartboard. A vibrant circle of fruits constitutes the outermost ring. Moving toward the center are the vegetables, then a ring of kitchen staples like pungent shrimp paste, then the spices that give Thai food its tang. And, finally, in the bull's eye, are the chickens, fish, frogs, and edible insects.

Glamour dictates the arrangement of the market, and what's "glamorous" is what's colorful. For example, in the prime retail space of the market's outer ring, tropical fruits are the supermodels of even the smallest village market. Arranged on trays and cribbed in baskets, beautiful fruits glow in sharp slants of rising sun, beckoning to passers-by. Like an organic billboard, the display of mouth-watering pomelos, papayas, rose apples and rambutan are the first thing a shopper sees.

People who arrive at the market by foot, car, bike, or rickshaw looking for something pedestrian like meat must first behold majestic mangosteens, cascading coconuts, and a bounty of bananas.

A Thai favorite, bananas are market sweethearts. More than twenty varieties are grown in the country, and they monopolize several display tables of every Thai market in a campaign of yellow. Banana vendors are clever and often rig their tables with racks for

hanging the fruit left, right, and overhead. Framed by dangling banana bunches, the tabletop is covered with a rise of bananas three feet high and parted down the middle. Sitting at the end of this display on a small stool is a well-groomed vendor, smiling amid her bounty.

Typical tropical fruits (like bananas) fare especially well with *farangs*— foreigners— who just don't know what to make of the more exotic varieties. The bumbling *farang* in a Thai market dismisses the hairy but delectable rambutan as some kind of Martian fruit, and chooses instead the sunny, juicy mango, often sold peeled, sliced, and ready for takeaway.

Fruits that frighten foreigners, however, are Thais' preferred varieties, like the mangosteen, rambutan, and of course, the spiky, football-sized durian. Thais revere the durian like some Americans adore Elvis. Although it's heavy and has a weird, faintly toilety smell, its devotees are fanatic. The durian's taste is unique and balanced: sweet coconut, vanilla, and banana, with a simultaneously rubbery and custard-like texture.

If Thais view the durian as "king of fruits," then mangosteen is the princess. This berry of the Malaysian evergreen has a hard, aubergine rind capped with four curled sepals that form a green crown. Inside, as many as seven seeds are surrounded by sweet, juicy, pure white flesh.

Rambutan, the scary Martian fruit, is red-hulled and covered with coarse, succulent, green-tipped hair. After dissecting the fruit from its extraterrestrial exterior, the intrepid *farang* would be delighted by the sweet, slippery ellipsoid inside. Eating

rambutan is like biting into an egg-shaped grape soaked in coconut juice.

Whether you're on the outskirts of the market, rambling past the rambutan with the sun in your eyes, or stepping past piles of meat in the shadowy bull's eye, notice the organization of the tables. You'll find that, although there's much for sale at the market, individual tables are often spread with one thing and one thing only.

There's the eggplant table, the lemongrass table, the two tables pushed together and racked with eggs next to a dais of rice: long-, short-, and broken-grain next to rice that's jasmine or that steams up sticky.

The tables are typically rough-hewn affairs, with sturdy post legs that hoist the goods about three feet off the ground. Sometimes a vendor sits on a stool behind the table, sometimes on the table itself. It all depends on how high the goods are piled and what role the vendor plays in preparing them for sale.

A few glamour rings into the market, I once saw a woman selling fat, live frogs. She sat cross-legged on her table beside two huge, shallow, black tubs. Stretched over each was a net, holding her amphibians captive.

"*Saam gohp, kha,*" said one customer, asking for three frogs.

Reaching under the net, the vendor extracted them one by one, dropping them into a clear plastic bag. She then placed the bag on a slab of butcher-block and, with an executioner's detachment and a small wooden club, swiftly struck the frogs dead. The customer handed over thirty baht— usually less than a dollar— and accepted the bloody bag in return.

In the real thick of it, the bull's eye of a Thai market is where various meats are sold. Here, the most glamorous thing is a live chicken. It's not a pretty place. The dirt floor is muddy with blood and the smell of raw meat and roasted insects chokes out the scent of fruit. Animal parts— haunches, heads, tails, organs, and heaps of muscle— sprawl. Customers don't touch, they point: *kilo neung, kha*. One kilo of intestines, please. Here, *farangs* grow narrow. Here, people walk with their shoulders hunched up and their arms tight to their sides to avoid brushing against the meaty tables. The Thai shoppers, although narrow as well, are exceptionally gracious. Even in their rubber slippers with blood all around, they don't grimace at the smell or the puddles. They just get what they need and shuffle away... all in pursuit of only the freshest ingredients for home-cooking Thai food.

Radiating out the other side of the bull's eye, the air becomes lighter, something you don't mind inhaling. You'll encounter a miscellany of items between the meat in the center and the fruit on the outskirts. One thing your sinuses won't let you miss: the chilies.

Dried chilies are sold from clear plastic garbage bags, cuffed like burlap sacks. For ventilation, the fresh ones are spread out on shallow, bamboo baskets shaped like jumbo Frisbees and kept in the shade. Whether dried or fresh, where there are chilies, there's fire in the air. Each inhalation leaves shoppers sniffling, as motes of red-hot chili dust assault the eyes and nose.

More than ten varieties of chili peppers are used in Thai cooking. The largest—the finger chili— contains the fewest seeds and is therefore the mildest. The tiniest and most fierce is a variety Thais call *prik kee noo*, or "rat shit chili" for its size. Dense with seeds, *prik kee noo* is the outstanding ingredient among a dozen others pounded together to make another of the market's hot sellers: curry paste.

Traditionally in Thailand, curry pastes were not sold at the market. A woman pounded her own using mortar and pestle, and her skill would determine for suitors whether or not she would make an acceptable bride. Now, vendors sell curry paste by the scoopful, carving it out of two-foot-high domes piled side by side on tables. We can only wonder who actually pounds it all, and how many suitors she boasts.

Rattling and clinking with bottles of oil, rice vinegar, and fish, soy, and oyster sauce is the table of kitchen staples. Rounding out this section are pucks of palm sugar, plastic sandwich bags swollen with coconut milk, baskets of peanuts, and trays of gnarled *kha*, or ginza, a relative of the ginger root.

Almost to the sunny side of the market again are the vegetables. Leafy basil beds, foot-long snake beans, and jumbles of squash are sold near the flanks of the market. Being largely monochromatic, vegetables are not quite as glamorous as the fruit. Pale bean sprouts, soft piles of mushrooms, and bamboo shoots struggle to entice, but in the glamour contest of a Thai market, they can't compete wiht mangos, much less the "king of fruits."

Your straight path through every ring of the market has led you back out the other side, where the sun shines and the fruit glows. It's glamorous on the outer ring, indeed. But, having seen the spectrum of goods for sale, you know there's more to a Thai market than just good looks.

Part Four: Travel Narratives Combining Place and Self

What It's Worth: Retreat From Your Vacation

Dtuuumm: my retreat would begin with the sonorous sound of a gong struck once by a cushioned mallet. I'd read in my Thailand guidebook that some Buddhist temples allow lay visitors to stay and practice meditation.

"Perfect," I thought to myself, as I envisioned a place where I could clear both my vacation-from-hell itinerary and my mind. Even better— I'd be getting away from it all in the transporting locale of exotic Southeast Asia.

Something occurred to me just before leaving for Bangkok, when I'd pulled two consecutive all-nighters getting ready for my getaway. One night I spent squeezing every item off my to-do list. The other, I devoted to making a list of all the things I wanted to do on vacation. I realized this trip was going to be nearly as stressful as the rest of my life— just farther away, and a lot more expensive.

So, I decided to retreat from my vacation, while on vacation.

Perched on a hillside in a rural village, a temple was the perfect spot. The place was an oasis from the hustle of a city like Chiang Mai, an hour away and a world apart. No sightseeing, no tourists, and nothing to do.

When I arrived, I was shown to a *guti*, a tiny, one-room brick house with its own privy. Having left my bags with friends, I showed up for my one-week stay practically empty-handed. Only the essentials made the cut: two pairs of loose, cool pants, a few shirts, a toothbrush, and soap. Oh, and a journal to keep track of my thoughts.

For a week, I never left the temple grounds. I lived alone and had few conversations— sparse words of meditation instruction from an English-speaking monk, a quiet "hello" from a shaven, white-clad Buddhist nun.

My life at the temple was simple. I woke every day at 4 a.m., while it was still dark outside. My alarm really was the sound of a gong: *dtuuumm*. Then a chorus of trilling roosters and chirping sparrows. The low, waking howls of a few resident dogs echoed throughout the temple, bouncing off the spotless floor in the prayer hall, or *sala*.

Rise and shine.

The huge, open-sided *sala* was the Buddhist equivalent of a cathedral. Its proportions were glorious. The steeply pitched rooftop came to a sharp point high above the trees that surrounded and shaded this massive prayer hall. Sessions of silent meditation and chanting *en masse* (about 75 people) were held twice a day.

I joined these assemblies. One of the nuns even lent me a small, woven cotton mat to sit on. In between sessions, I often walked the grounds, listening to the breeze and letting the temple's peaceful pace consume me. Other times I stayed in my *guti*, where I meditated— or just thought— for hours at a stretch.

A semi-English-speaking monk, helping me with "meditation practice," implored me to slow down even more than I already had. It took a few days to get used to moving slowly, thinking thoroughly, and being mindful of everything around me. Once I adjusted, however, simplicity started to come naturally. I felt liberated, centered.

By the fourth day of my retreat, I realized what was wrong with the harried "vacations" of my past: I *wanted* too much out of them.

I wanted to see sights, take tours, enroll in classes, sample the fare, visit markets. The pace I set for myself on vacation was about two MPH under my usual speed limit. It was hectic, and it was seldom refreshing. Plus, by the time I got home, I could barely remember all of the things I'd seen and done. Too much, too fast.

The beauty of this retreat from my vacation in Thailand was its unstructured-ness. Even attending the chanting and meditation meetings was optional. I was by myself, and all I had to do was think. At last, I had slowed to a stop. A rolling stop, maybe, since I left the temple after only seven days, but pretty darned close to stopping nonetheless.

The temple experience was a bit like voluntary solitary confinement. Away from people. Away from itineraries. Away from demands, desires, and deadlines, the way a vacation is supposed to be.

I wanted slow, and that's what I got.

Although a peaceful escape from my regular life, the temple schedule was, if anything, too tranquil. There were times when, sitting in the *guti*, I became antsy. I wanted something to do. I wanted to talk to someone. I wanted to eat something besides rice. I *wanted*.

"What's wrong with wanting?" I mused. "It's practically an American pastime."

And this, I realized, was the trouble.

At the temple, I learned that one of the precepts of the Buddhist faith is renunciation of *want*— immediate or long-term. It is acceptance of what is right now, whatever that happens to be. Sounds easy enough, right?

It's not.

Once I became aware of this constant consumptive drive, I realized how pervasive it is. Even during meditation sessions in the *sala*, I wanted. Instead of letting go of desire, I'd think about how I wanted to check my e-mail, how I hoped to squeeze in some overseas holiday shopping. How I craved espresso...

I learned an important lesson after the week-long retreat— one that has dramatically improved my outlook on both vacation and life. Eliminate *want*.

Although I didn't "check in" to the temple hoping for a revelation, I had one: I wasn't happiest when I got what I wanted. I was happiest when I didn't want anything. Recalling the highs and lows of my life, I realized that my best days were characterized by a palpable absence of want. I wish I had more of those days to look back on.

My recommendation for someone planning to retreat is to take this time-out alone. Be by yourself. Slow down, and if possible, stop. The only thing you should feel compelled to do is to think. You may not solve the mystery of your existence, but you will find that you'll at least become conversant with your own thoughts. Get to know them well, while you have the time to do so.

If your vacation is a week long, try to retreat for at least a full day and night. If you have more than a week, try it for a few days.

After leaving the temple, I canceled the city tours and whatnot from my trip itinerary. I spent the remainder of my vacation learning about Thailand by intentionally getting myself lost. Without looking at my watch, a tourist map, or any overrated "must-sees," my sightseeing took place with every step.

All around me, I saw what I would have missed had I insisted on keeping pace with the rest of my life. I vowed to myself that any future vacation would include a vacation. And not only that, so would my life at home.

Sidebar:

How to "Book" A Temple Retreat in Thailand

It wasn't unlike booking a hotel reservation. My one-week stay at Wat Phra Baat, a Buddhist temple in the North of Thailand, began with a brief meeting with the abbot, or *Phra Aajahn,* holy teacher. My friend, a Thai woman named Poppy, accompanied me to translate my request.

I had decided to retreat from my vacation and temporarily join a community where daily lifestyles are slow and meditative. The only rules: wake up early, go to bed early, eat little, speak little, think a lot.

Outside of the abbot's office, Poppy and I knelt on a woven bamboo mat on the floor. We *wai*'d solemnly— putting both palms together at chest-level— when he greeted us with a nod. He waited for one of us to begin speaking; Poppy did, in Thai. She

explained that I wished to stay at the temple for a short time, to experience daily life there.

Phra Aajahn nodded again.

Then it was my turn. Poppy urged me to tell the abbot in my own words what I came for. I told him I'd like to practice meditation, but mostly I just wanted to think. The abbot's English was fair, so I imagined he got the gist of what I had said.

His reply: "O.K." And that was that.

Then we went to see the head nun, *Mae Tdow*, the temple's logistics coordinator.

We found her on the other side of the temple grounds. She was sitting on the floor in the *sala* flanked by piles of long, white cotton strips like cooked pasta. *Mae Tdow* was weaving, seemingly oblivious to the cloud of mosquitos plaguing her work space. She seemed friendlier than the abbot. When she laughed, her weathered face was animated by expressive wrinkles. She looked a bit like a chipmunk, with plump cheeks and round brown eyes.

This time, Poppy did all the talking, as *Mae Tdow* spoke no English. They addressed questions of food, mostly, noting that I could and would eat just about any Thai food set before me. Sticky rice, spicy food, meat, and vegetables are all staples of any northern Thai diet.

We got consent from *Mae Tdow*, and the date was set: Monday, for a week. No need to bring a sheet; a straw mat would be provided.

As Poppy pulled away from the temple in her pick-up truck, I felt nervous and excited about the week before me. My biggest apprehension: what should I wear? Would

I be suited up in the white cotton pants and shirt I'd seen *Mae Tdow* wearing? Monk's robes were probably out of the question.

I asked Poppy. She told me that I should dress politely (I do, as a rule, especially in Thailand). "When you look in the mirror, you should see polite dress. Do not wear the hot pants, or the see-through shirts." Gotcha.

Fact Box:

Practicalities

- Arranging a stay at any Thai Buddhist temple will be easier if you have help from a translator.
- Generally, temples with female clergy (Buddhist nuns are *mae chii* in Thai) will accept lay female visitors. Men will be accepted at nearly every temple.
- Check your guidebook (*Lonely Planet* is good) for listings of temples throughout Thailand. Typically, you'll find one in every town and village. In the far-flung villages, however, temple residents may be unaccustomed to English-speaking visitors, so a translator is imperative. Try asking a student to help you if you're off the tourist track.
- If you have special diet needs (e.g., vegetarian, dairy-free, etc.), make these clear. The temple's kitchen staff is unlikely to heed your request for a "low-fat" diet, so don't bother. You'll only be eating once a day anyway.

- Temple stays are generally *gratis*, though a donation of a few dollars a day is appropriate. You should present the gift in an envelope on the last day of your visit to the person who granted you initial permission to stay.
- Familiarize yourself with Buddhist etiquette. A few basics include:
  - — If you are a female, never try to hand anything directly to a monk. They are forbidden to take anything— even a donation— from your hand.
  - — Keep the soles of your feet out of sight. This means sitting with your legs together and your feet tucked behind you.
  - — Dress respectfully. Loose-fitting pants and a long-sleeved shirt is appropriate. Females do not need to cover their hair.
  - — Never touch a Buddha image. Never touch a Thai on the head.
  - — Always remove your shoes (you can leave your socks on) before entering any Buddhist structure such as a *guti*, *sala*, or any temple building.
- Always remember that you are *not* staying in a hotel. A temple is a sacred place to Buddhists. Be respectful of this at all times, and err on the side of discretion.

Nobody Walks to Khao Yai

It was my big idea. We'd take the tracks. A train of two— Kei and me— we'd cover 75 miles between Thailand's sand-dry, salted Northeast and its wettest monsoon forest, Khao Yai. This way, we'd breathe no highway fumes on our walk and we'd get to see the country, slowly. According to my plan, it would take us one week.

Before he left Japan to come walk with me, Kei and I lobbed e-mail back and forth between Chiang Mai, where I was studying Thai cooking, and Tokyo, where he was studying material engineering.

Dear Kei, I wrote from a storefront "cybercafé":

I am happy to hear from you!

When you get here, do you want to meet me at Khao Yai National Park, or do you want to walk through Issan with me?

Here's the plan: walk from Issan (the Northeast region of Thailand, about 150 miles from Bangkok) to Khao Yai, on railroad tracks, probably. It will be hot, and maybe rainy, but I believe it is the best way for true sightseeing.

Please reply soon.

Jen ("Som-o")

P.S. Last time I visited Thailand, my friend Poppy gave me the Thai nickname of "Som-o." She told me it's a fruit with white flesh that is sometimes sweet and sometimes sour. Like me?! Ha, ha.

A few days later, Kei replied that he wanted to walk. I booked him a cheap flight— 500 baht— from Bangkok to Khorat, in *Issan*.

Som-o! (fruit)

I have got your message. And your proposal and kindness is excellent. So you found a very cheep chicket!! In my guide book, cost is 855B. I will pay you back. Thank you very much. I will meet you for walking in Khorat.

I bought new boots. It is because grandfather's boots I once wore were broken. (Grandfather is fine, maybe....ahaha.)

So I walked from my school to home yesterday for practice. It is 12km long. It took 2hours and 20min. I was so tired and muscular pain is beginning... Oh my....

I can't wait to meet you and walk! And I have to train my foots for you not to leave me!!

*

Issan is the poorest region in Thailand. Northeasterners wring their living from a land of perpetual drought, inadequate irrigation, and infertile soil. You don't see many postcards for sale here. Only two percent of Thailand's international visitors bother with *Issan*. Most would rather skip the dust plate.

I was sure that by going to *Issan*, I would at last see the traditional Thai culture I'd heard and read so much about. There would be shy, giggling children, water buffalo, and the endless *chink-chink-chink* of mortar and pestle. And, to be sure I wouldn't miss

anything along the way, I'd walk. As for the shadeless sandstone Khorat plateau (also known as the "Plain of Tears") I'd be traversing, well, I'd just wear a cap and lots of sunblock. Ten miles a day seemed reasonable, even in late July and at the same latitude as Saudi Arabia.

*

My train from Chiang Mai rolled into Khorat the day before Kei was to arrive. As we neared the station, I squinted out of the open window to see the Khorat plateau. Instead of being a feature of the landscape— something you could see in the distance— this enormous stone table *was* the landscape. From my vantage point, *Issan* was a sweep of land so vast its dwellers were reduced to motes, suspended in the sunlight. The horizon vibrated, rippling with heat.

*

A rickshaw delivered me to "Doctor Guesthouse" a modest home on a *soi* off one of Khorat's main streets. The owner, a spry, short man in his fifties, slid open the iron gate and greeted me vigorously. He pumped my hand, welcoming me to his quiet house. A heavily varnished teak table was parked in the carport off the side of the house. On the table was a bug-proof plastic dome protecting a cluster of condiments for western tastes: jam, sugar, Coffee Mate packets, salt and pepper. Three rental bikes leaned in a stack against the fence. There appeared to be no other visitors.

The owner was still beaming at me when he called himself "Papasan" and insisted I do the same. He grabbed my backpack and ushered me inside where it was dim and

cool. Walking behind him, I noticed that his shirt was whitened and stiff from hanging out to dry. His shorts reached down to his knees, revealing the smooth, well-defined calf muscles of someone who walked a lot.

"How long you stay Doctorguesshouse?"

Papasan ejected the phrase forcefully, involuntarily— like a sneeze. I soon learned that this was a marketing tool. "This place no like hotel. This place family. Safe. Quiet. Doctorguesshouse!" He turned to climb a narrow flight of stairs.

"I show you room. Only 180 baht one night. No like hotel. Hotel you pay 1,000 baht A/C." He opened the door onto a room full of bed— the mattress was twice as wide as it was long. There were three square feet for moving upright.

"Clean room, see? Fan makes windy, see? Stay cool: Doctorguesshouse!"

I thanked him, paid 360 baht for two nights, and retired for a nap. Later, when I went downstairs to see about laundry, Papasan cornered me.

"You say you friend Japan come Doctorguesshouse?"

I affirmed. Kei was due the next evening around six.

He leaned back on his heels, smiling. "Papasan know Japan," he said proudly. "Many visitor Japan stay Doctorguesshouse. Japan like." He produced an address book with guests' names, addresses, and remarks about the accommodations— a collection of testimonials. Several entries were in Japanese.

From the same shelf, Papasan reached for a small photo album. He showed me pictures of his three sons. "Son number one, go to Bangkok. Son number two, he die. Son number three, he study."

Papasan surprised me by remembering my Thai name. "Som-o, how old?"

I told him 26, and he lit up.

"Same son-woman number four! You 26. She 26." He pointed to a framed photo of a young woman— his daughter— standing in front of a fountain.

"See, my son-woman number four, she 26. Same same you!" he repeated. "Son-woman working Hong Kong bank. Papasan visit, and..." he stopped his explanation. His chest heaved under pretend sobs, fingertips trailing down his round cheeks represented tears. "Papasan, Mamasan love her very much, son-woman number four."

After our conversation about his daughter, Papasan took to me, like family. Or, maybe it was because I was the only guest in the house. The next evening when I asked him how to get to the airport, he took a shirt from the back of his chair and buttoned it as he explained, "You no go alone. Papasan help you. No like hotel: Doctorguesshouse!"

He slipped into some rubber sandals. Before he closed the iron gate behind us, he called to Mamasan that he'd be back soon. The sloshing sound of his wife's washing stopped for a moment, then started again after the two exchanged a few words in Thai.

At the intersection of the *soi* and the main road, Papasan flagged a *songthaew*— a ride like a big shared taxi, cheap and convenient. I stepped into the back of the truck, ducking to avoid knocking into the steel canopy (Papasan just cleared it). We wedged in

among a dozen uniformed school students as if squeezing into an overcrowded cockpit, and the truck rejoined the rush-hour flow of cars.

A couple miles later, Papasan buzzed a doorbell on the ceiling, and we were let off at a busy Khorat intersection. The *songthaew* drove off, its schoolboys peeking out the back.

We were standing for less than a minute when a motorized rickshaw sliced through traffic to meet us. Papasan and the driver negotiated, and I was instructed to get in.

"He drive you airport. Good for safety. 300 baht. I fix price," Papasan told me.

Three hundred baht sounded high until I learned that the airport was on the outskirts of town, fifteen miles down the kind of unlit street where anything could happen. The rickshaw driver turned out to be Papasan's nephew, and after arriving safely thirty minutes later, I knew I'd been placed in good hands.

*

"Kei, you're already here!" I exclaimed at the airport. It had been a year since I'd seen him, and aside from the ponytail, Kei looked the same. His pale, skinny legs were cartoonish, punctuated by a pair of thin black socks and rugged hiking boots. I'm sure that I was just as funny looking after the windy rickshaw ride. Approaching Kei, I must have been a squall of blond hair wrapped in a red sarong.

After a moment of hesitant recognition, Kei grinned, exhaled a puff of cigarette smoke, and bowed a Japanese greeting, "Ah, so good to see you! I am ready to walk!" he announced, pointing to his new boots. "How are your legs for tomorrow, Sum-o?"

"Kei," I laughed, "It's *Som*-o." After correcting him, I wondered to myself what difference it made whether Kei called me a big fat wrestler or a grapefruit. "My legs are fine, Kei. We can start walking tomorrow."

Although I didn't know Kei very well, I was excited to see him after a year of letter-writing. We'd met only once, while he was traveling in Alaska the summer before.

He and I had spent an afternoon on the tundra, where he ran full speed over the springy ground, his arms wide open. When our van bogged down in a rain-filled rut on the way home, Kei ended up the muddiest of four people who heaved us out. All the way back to town, he wore a dreamy smile as he stared out the window. A smear of caked mud across his forehead made him look like he was playing wild man. Later, in the forest next to my cabin, I spied Kei clinging to the spindly trunk of a black spruce tree a scant foot taller than him. He leaned his head all the way back, ecstatic as he squinted through the treetops at the midnight sun.

On his last night in Alaska, he drew a simple diagram of our friendship: two circles side by side, slightly overlapping.

"I am east," he explained, pointing to one circle. "You are west," he said, pointing to the other. "Our friendship," he said, shading the overlapping part with his pencil, "is in between." Kei was the most inspired engineering student I'd ever met.

In Thailand, I trusted him to be a joyous traveling companion, with curiosity to match my own. My instincts proved right.

We collected his backpack and loaded it into the idling rickshaw. Our shared enthusiasm about the journey ahead electrified the dark ride back into Khorat.

*

Finally, after all of the e-mails, the logistics, the route-planning, the leg training, and the mental preparation, our walk began. We waved goodbye to Papasan and Doctorguesshouse, shouldered our packs, and hopped on the tracks like two tramps without a train.

I imagined this old railroad would lead us out of the city and into a pastoral age in which Buddhist monks tended a community of villagers and villagers tended fields. I wanted to glimpse what I'd heard Thai people refer to as "the former time," and hoped I would recognize it when I saw it. With those first few steps of the journey, my expectations soared.

Kei and I walked single file; the narrow gauge permitted little more than one set of feet in between. Almost immediately, it started raining.

"I think Thai god has a sense of humor," Kei mused aloud from behind me. Once the cloudburst wore itself out, the rocks along the railroad steamed in the sunlight.

Straight as tightropes, the tracks stretched out for miles. Within minutes after the rain, they were dry and gleaming white in the midday sun, no bend in sight. The steam off the rocks was infused with a creosote smell that burned my nose and made me swallow hard. We had a long way to go, I realized then. Kei wasn't musing aloud anymore; we were both quiet.

We cobbled our way over stumblingly medium-sized rocks. Because of the uneven terrain, I was forced to stare at my feet, plotting every step, missing the scenery, unable to look around for the former time. The sun's laser-like reflection stung my peripheral vision. The heat was dizzying and I felt faint. We'd been walking for thirty minutes.

The railroad was shadeless. For a break, we plopped down on our packs trackside and squinted into the sun as we guzzled our whole supply of (warm) water. Kei was tired, too, so we decided that this would be a short walking day. It being our first, we'd take it easy and stop when we spotted the first temple. We hoped we would be granted permission to sleep there.

After our break and two more hours of rocks and white hot walking, I saw a steeply pitched tile roof through the low trees and thatched rooftops of a nearby village.

"Kei," I said, breaking the silence, "I see a temple. Let's go through here."

We bolted off the tracks and ducked through a gap in the fence of tall weeds beside the railroad. On the other side was an empty acre of ankle-high grass. Walking on the ground again was like walking on the moon. Suddenly, Kei and I were smiling, free from the tracks and their stony gravity.

The village was quiet until dogs announced our arrival. First barking, then howling, the scrawny, uncollared guardians barely let us pass along the dirt road through this village of simple wooden homes. There seemed to be only dogs, no people. Next to every vacant doorway were two Volkswagen-sized vats of water. These stone reservoirs gave me hope for the journey: artifacts of some former time, maybe even *the* former time.

Midway through the village, people emerged from their homes. They stood near their water vats like curious sentinels and watched us pass. Neither hospitable nor hostile, they merely observed. Some nodded faintly as we weakly grinned, wishing for welcome.

We reached the temple. A gaggle of children greeted us, *ooohing* and *aaahing* over our packs, my hair, the sudden appearance of a *farang*, a foreigner. One girl turned to Kei and began speaking to him in rapid Thai. He looked at me for assistance.

"*Nippon*," I said, pointing to Kei: Japanese. The kids giggled at their mistake and tried their luck with me. They quickly exhausted my Thai vocabulary with their questions, and soon gave up trying to converse. Instead, they led us to the *wihan*, one of the temple's many outbuildings. Inside, it was cramped with a floor-to-ceiling Buddha image, Kei and me, and half a dozen pre-teens. One girl used matches to light joss sticks. The tiniest boy mimed for us the ritual of bowing three times before the Buddha statue, then pointed to us to repeat. Bowing like the little boy, our movements were awkward and self-conscious, both from lack of experience and from all of the attention, but when we finished bowing the children smiled and nodded their approval.

That night, we slept under a pavilion next to the *wihan*. At first, an authoritative young girl gave us permission, pointing to a raised platform that would keep most of the geckos and insects from scurrying over us as we slept. Later, after we'd set up my tent on this platform, a monk came by and spoke to Kei in Thai, which he did not understand. The monk ignored me. He explained to Kei where the bath was, waving with a cigarette in one hand toward the main temple building.

As we lay side by side in the tent that night, Kei and I whispered and giggled like two slaphappy kids. We hadn't come so far— yet— but at least we were out of Khorat.

"How do you feel, Kei?" I asked him in the dark.

"I feel like walking."

By this, I was relieved and encouraged.

*

Before sunrise, we rose and struck camp. Our strategy for the day was to escape the sun for a few hours by setting off in the dark. The cool, dewy dawn eased us into our second day's walking.

By 8 a.m., the sun was roasting the backs of our necks as we plodded along. Later, it pounded our brows with broad blows of heat. We walked on, not saying much.

At each tiny train depot, workers gathered at the platform to watch our arrival. Some offered water; they could tell we were walkers. Others, who couldn't, laughed and tried to tell us about the next train and how it would be coming soon to take us to Khao Yai.

"*Chawp deu-un*," I chirped in reply: We like to walk.

By that time, however, we didn't like walking. The heat, the glare, the annoying rocks underfoot, and the railroad creosote smell clogged our enjoyment. But after investing so much in this plan to go on foot, I was determined to finish this journey the way we'd started it.

Ten miles and ten walking hours since Doctor Guesthouse had changed the scenery from grubby city to suburban bucolic. Rice paddies flanked both sides of the tracks. Water buffaloes snuffled and stared at us from across the green distance of field. Kei and I saw few people: a farmer wading out to a shade tree for lunch; a glistening, sweaty boy with his milk-bellied river fish dangling on a handline; and, at an intersection of tracks and street, a fretful-looking railroad officer.

"*Pbi-nai, khap?*" He asked anxiously where we were going.

"*Chawp deu-un,*" I answered in the same artificially happy voice with which I addressed the depot onlookers. "*Pbi Khao Yai.*"

He implored us to reconsider. When his Thai explanations became too advanced for me, he resorted to pantomime.

"Pow!" he hollered, making as if he'd clonked Kei over the head with a blunt object, a rock perhaps. He contrived a sadistic smile, turned to me and pounced a half-step forward. Instinctively, I shrunk from him, his suggested intent.

There are bandits, he said, bad people who hide in the weeds down there, gesturing around the next bend in the tracks. We should not walk any farther.

"No walking," he said in the stilted English he must have remembered from grade school. "*Mai dai*"— you cannot.

Kei and I deliberated. The three of us stood near the railroad on the sloping berm of rocks which tumbled like talus each time we shifted. We had covered only a fraction of our ground. As clearly as I saw the tracks to Khao Yai stretching on for miles, I could see

the ten that lay behind us: water buffalo and eiectric green rice paddies, stoneware jugs of water, village sentinels, and their children showing us how to worship. It could all pass for the former time. On our journey, I saw the present time, too: the cigarette-smoking monk, Papasan missing his daughter, and the threat of bandits along our route.

The official deflated with relief when we said "O.K." and turned around in our tracks to walk to the last depot we'd passed. The onlookers were there, shaking their heads and laughing.

On the train to Khao Yai, Kei and I brooded out the window as the scenery blurred past and we couldn't see anything at all.

Thais Dancing

I once saw a Thai couple dance in the middle of the night. While their grandchildren dreamt of A/C, asleep in front of electric fans, the couple rose at 3 a.m. They slid into rubber slippers, then out the back door and into the yard. Under a flourescent light and without music, they began. In silent synchronicity, he led and she followed.

What I call "dance" was, to them, work. Mellowed by twenty years of practice, however, their routine was as elegant as a tango. Over two decades, their slippered steps had buffed a shiny path on the concrete floor where they worked together doing one thing: making soy milk.

In Thailand, where I first drank it, soy milk is served steaming hot— too hot to drink right away. It's ladled from a stainless steel vat into a plastic bag, sold at outdoor markets early in the morning by mom-and-pop vendors like the ones I watched.

But, soy milk is also big business. In modern production facilities around the world, machines and line workers interface during the "aqueous extract process" in which soybeans are ground, mixed with water, cooked, filtered, and sweetened. Sometimes, flavors and fortifiers are added. Mass-produced soy milk is packaged in boxes that have sharp little straws stuck to them. Line workers and machines get the soy milk made, but no one tangos on company time.

*

I never knew their names. I only knew they were my friend's parents. Bee, a woman from a village in Thailand's rural North, invited me for a visit to see "how Thai people live." Late one afternoon, we arrived at her house. It was bigger than many I'd seen, with dozens of roosters in cages stacked beneath a mango tree in the front yard. Stepping out of her shoes and walking through the door in one fluid motion, Bee went inside, calling me to follow.

In the small, yellow kitchen, she offered me a drink. "*Nam tao who ao-mai?*" Never one to turn down soy milk— *nam tao who*— of course I said yes. Bee opened the refrigerator, pulled out two bags of soy milk, and emptied them into little cups. By her second, dainty sip I had slammed all of mine. It was like drinking half-and-half made from beans, sweet and rich. She giggled, "Som-o, I think you like *nam tao who*." She was right.

Anywhere in Thailand, any time I was even close to a market, I wandered in, wishing for soy milk. White wafts of steam rising from behind a heap of pineapples or a coconut-covered table could mean only one thing. Usually, I was wrong, and it wasn't soy milk that I found. I'd come bobbing around the coconut table, five baht hot in my hand to buy *nam tao who*, only to find a Chinese vendor opening the door on some dumplings. Soy milk is made in the middle of the night, and it's a rare morning that any remains after 8 a.m. I was never up that early.

Bee let me in on something: "My parents make it— *nam tao who*," she said, nodding.

"Your parents? Where? Here?" I asked, like a junkie.

"Yes, here," she assented proudly. "Why don't you watch them? They can teach you."

Her parents, her *Mae* and *Pah*, who I met at dinner, made a plan for me in rapid, barely intelligible Thai. *Does the 'farang' really want to get up at 3 a.m.?... Who will wake her?... She can sleep in the T.V. room... There is an extra fan...*

The word *farang* came up again and again, so I knew they were discussing me. Taken from the Thais' corrupted pronunciation of "French" (the Fa-rench were among the first Westerners to visit Thailand), *farang* refers to any white person, French or not.

That night, I slept in a room with a mattress, a window, a T.V., and an extra fan. Because it was July, I kept the fan on its highest speed, "windy," and pointed it at my head. By 3 a.m., I was shivering. I woke when I heard activity in the kitchen, down the wooden hallway from where I slept. A full moon shone through the open window, and by its light, I rose.

Bee's father beamed when he saw me up and ready to learn his trade. His work clothes were a pair of loose, knee-length shorts and a breezy, short-sleeved buttoned shirt. Pah was a short man, about five-five and built like your average high school junior, except for a perfectly round paunch that protruded straight out from his belt-line. His graying hair was neatly separated by a comb-straight part. When he smiled, which was often, his eyes became narrow little crescents, and his eyebrows shot skyward. It was an animated, amusing expression that I soon found myself imitating.

Pah motioned for me to follow him out back. Just past the doorway were several pairs of rubber slippers. He pointed to them, and as I wriggled into the largest pair, he watched, resisting a chuckle. I would have been embarrassed, but Pah was smiling that funny smile, and even as I struggled, my grin mirrored his, eyebrows hitched up by two invisible strings.

Properly shod, we shuffled along the back of the house. Hanging from the wall were all sorts of steel and aluminum pots and pans for making soy milk: dull, dented, deep, shallow, shiny, big, and blackened. The backyard was rigged for work, with the pots, a sink, a tall propane tank with built-in burner, a heavy-duty juicing machine, tubs, buckets, straining bags and baskets, and two tiny, wooden work stools— one for Mae, one for Pah. For me, a folding chair.

Mae was already outside, making a small fire with sections of bamboo. She squatted with her back to us in front of the brick fireplace wearing a faded, flowered *pasin* and a simple cap-sleeved blouse that revealed strong, thick arms draped with the soft, tissue-papery skin of a grandmother.

As Pah and I approached, she continued tending her fire without glancing at us. The bamboo burned smoky and fragrant. Pah looked at his wife's plump, crouched frame, smiled, and announced, "Madame make rice...lots." His awkward English sentence was a proud proclamation: we have enough to eat.

At this, Mae looked up at us and smiled, almost imperceptibly. Unlike Pah, her expression rarely changed. She worked steadily, emotions obscured by her placid face.

As soon as Pah had smiled back at her (his eyes bunched up in admiration), Mae returned to the rice. As she steamed the family's daily supply— three pounds— Pah began the preliminary bean work.

Near the sink, a huge pot held a heap of soybeans that bobbed underwater like a colony of tiny scallops. Pah tipped the pot into a hamper-sized rattan strainer basket and smoothed the beans into a glistening, off-white dome.

Then he opened the works of the bean machine. Pointing to two nubs with sharp, shiny edges, he made a twirling motion with his finger. I assumed that this was a juicer, the kind a health food café would use to make beet-carrot cocktail or spinach surprise.

Mae stood up, smoothed the sides of her skirt, and swept the area around the fireplace with a wispy broom. Her movements were deliberate and efficient without being rushed. She was so mindful of her tasks she hardly seemed to notice the sound of the juicer motor grinding away at the night's quiet cricket song.

After Pah funneled the beans and some water into his juicer, a black tub under the machine's spout filled quickly with an opaque, white slurry. Just as Pah flipped the "off" switch, Mae leaned her broom against the house's back wall. They both slid their tiny stools over to an empty pot near the juicer. Knees touching, Mae and Pah sat opposite one another with the pot between them.

I shifted in my folding chair, anxious to see how they would work together. Would he grin the whole time? Would she smile back? Would they talk?

On Pah's right was the tub of juiced soybeans; a red plastic bowl floated on the liquid's surface. Over the empty pot between them, Mae held open a sack of stiff, saffron-colored material. Pah filled the sack, bowl by bowl, with the bean-water slurry. Mae gathered the top of the bag and twisted it closed, suspending it with both hands by the cinch. Pah pressed on the sack's swollen sides, letting the extract seep through and flow into the pot below.

Drips and splashes textured the quiet night. There was no smiling and no talking; both Mae and Pah were absorbed by the task at hand. Mae repositioned her grip. She held the bag in front of her. Pah seized the sack and twisted it round, squeezing it tight and wringing more fine white liquid into the pot.

A mosquito landed on Pah's knee, and Mae leaned forward to gently blow it away. She tightened her grip on the sack, and the fluid flowed over white-knuckled hands, gripping and twisting. Soon, their work yielded almost a full pot.

When Pah rose to rinse the tub, Mae wrestled with the sack, trying to do both of their jobs. Her individual action was awkward and clumsy, like dancing alone. Not a drop seeped through the sides of the sack. Pah returned, sat down across from his wife, and together they wrung out a few last splashes.

They stood, stretched their arms behind them, and then heaved the pot onto a burner. As if on cue, they turned away from each other. Mae went to her fire and lit a bit of kindling. Pah turned the knob on the propane tank. Soon, an orange flame jumped beneath the huge pot, and they each stepped to the next task.

Mae stood at the sink, rinsing off whip-length strips of pandanus leaf. Pah danced around her feet, swabbing the floor with a rag that he pushed around with his toes. She folded the fronds into a brick-sized bundle, secured it with a strip of bamboo, and placed it carefully into the pot. Pah watched as she turned and walked inside the house. The crisp, green smell of pandanus that hung sharply in the air a moment ago was now infusing the soy milk with a subtle, fresh flavor.

Pah sat down on his stool and counted six scoops of golden sugar into a bowl resting in his lap. Then he unhooked a wooden-handled, stainless steel ladle from its place on the wall with the pots and set to stirring for thirty minutes. Mae's smoky fire had gone out, and the mosquitos gathered for a twilight feast. Pah waved them away with his free hand.

As soon as he stopped stirring and poured the sugar into the pot, Mae appeared with a mosquito coil and a can of sweetened condensed milk. Pah resumed stirring after Mae emptied the can on milk into the pot, and when she lit the mosquito coil, he stopped batting at the bugs.

Thirty minutes later, Pah rested his ladle on the side of the pot and asked me the same question that had brought me to this dark backyard: "*Nam tao who ao-mai*?"

With only a hint of ceremony, he ladled the milk into a small, plastic, pink cup and offered it to me, holding it by the rim with two fingers.

"*Khop khun djao*," I said, thanking him.

The soy milk was too hot to drink. It was almost too hot to hold. The steaming milk was liquid ivory; a ring of tiny bubbles curved around the inside of the cup. I waited.

From inside, we heard splashing water on a concrete floor.

"Madame bath," Pah told me, pointing to the house and pretending to lather.

We both took a sip of the *nam tao who*. No drink was sweeter— or hotter— than this. I closed my eyes for a second taste: bliss. I wanted to drink the whole pot.

Like his dainty daughter, Pah merely sipped his soy milk During the long pauses between sips, he blew on the hot liquid with short little puffs of air. When his wife emerged from the house, he stopped puffing into his cup. She was dressed in different, slightly more dressy clothes. Her *pasin* was bright and she wore a stiff, white doily of a blouse. Her short, curly hair was still damp from the bath. She looked scrubbed and fresh.

As Pah watched his wife sit at a stool to shake out the saffron sacks they'd used earlier, I noticed him breathing in the warm *nam tao who* vapors rising from his cup. Mae didn't notice me watching as she glanced over her shoulder at him, the coyest grandmother I'd ever seen.

Sauntering past the pots on the wall, Pah went inside to bathe. He came out later, dressed in the same clothes, and he and Mae poured twenty-five hot gallons of soy milk into three clear plastic sacks and set them in aluminum pots, which they hauled out to a three-wheeled freight cart in the front yard. Pah loaded the pots while Mae packed herself a small bag of sticky rice, donned an apron, and met her husband at the cart.

The dawn sky diluted the moonlight, and the roosters stirred and squawked when Pah slid open the iron gate in front of their house.

"Madame *pbi tdalaat*," he said. They were going to the market, where Mae would sell all of the *nam tao who* before 8 a.m. During their whole dance that night, they never said a word. They never needed to.

He pointed to me and then to the house, saying, "Sa-leep, sa-leep." But didn't want to sleep. I wanted to watch them leave.

Pah slid open the gate and squinted down the narrow dirt road, eyeing the market. He pushed the heavy cart of soy milk as his wife walked slowly beside him, keeping pace with her husband in the twilight.

When I saw their daughter, Bee, later that morning, Mae and Pah were still off selling their sweet soy milk.

"*Som-o*, did my parents teach you about *nam tao who*?" she asked.

Indeed. But more than that, they showed me how to be a better dancer.

Bugged

Well, Poppy was right. Maybe some insect did crawl in my ear.

I tried for a few days to withstand the pain and the piercing interruptions of my sleep. But as I was walking down a car-clogged main street in Chiang Mai, Thailand, dripping sweat from head to toe and swabbing myself with a bandanna, I admitted to myself that something was really awry. My ear— it was not wet with sweat, as I'd thought; it was blood.

So, I swabbed that too, took more Tylenol, and waited out the sudden rain with Thai whiskey and Sprite under the canopy of a corner bar that showed CNN clips in English. I figured I'd give this earache another night and get it checked out the next day. And hopefully it wouldn't be too expensive.

Penny-pinching— or, rather, "*baht*-pinching"— at the expense of one's hearing is not recommended. I realized this early the next morning, when I woke up to a bloody pillowcase. I called Poppy, an English-speaking Thai friend, to take me to the doctor.

We went to the Haripunchai Memorial Clinic in Lamphun, clearly a branch office. A young nurse wearing trendy, white shoes with three-inch platform soles and an old-fashioned nurse's cap of stiff cardboard smiled with amusement when I walked through the door. As a lesser-traveled satellite of touristy Chiang Mai, the provincial capital of Lamphun sees few *farangs*— foreigners.

In the clinic, I was surprised at how casual everything was. Although I've become accustomed to the slow, easy manner of the Thai people when it comes to doing anything, even banking or business, I guess I assumed a certain Western standard once inside a "medical facility."

This isn't to say that the place was violating any major health codes, just that the doctor didn't scrub before examining me, the sliding door into the storefront clinic was wide open, and in the bathroom, the only way to dry your hands was to use a thin cloth hung on the community towel rack.

What struck me more were the subtle differences between clinics I'd been to at home and this particular clinic: it was the way the orderlies— teenaged boys— leaned against the wall, laughing loudly and tipping back water bottles taken out of medicine cold storage. It was the nurse's funky shoes. It was the doctor reading a newspaper when I entered the examining room.

"Sit down, please," he told me in practiced, textbook-sounding English. "What is your problem?"

"Well, I have pain in my right ear. And bleeding," I said, with a finality that was supposed to establish the gravity of the condition and elicit some response.

The doctor opened a case of devices, flipped a switch on one of them, and held up an otoscope, a kind of ear-flashlight, so I could see it.

"Come here, please," he said.

I scooted forward in the chair, tilted my head towards him, holding aside my hair. This was all taking place right there at the desk where he was just moments ago reading about World Cup '98.

Without a hint of gentleness, he pushed the instrument into my tender, swollen, bleeding ear. Removing the otoscope and setting it down on the desk, he said, "Maybe you have some insect in your ear. I see hematoma. We remove insect. A little pain. Then pain for seven days during oral activity."

Wait, wait, wait a minute. What is this "maybe"?

"Do you *see* the insect?" I asked him, looking for more certainty than a word meaning "somewhere between yes or no" before he went scraping around in my ear canal with his *kieme*. I know a few Thai words; this is one of them. *Kieme*: tweezers. Sharp, metal, pincer-like object with far-reaching capacity relative to the side of my face and the inside of my head.

"No, do not see the insect. I see hematoma," the doctor reported.

Nonetheless, I consented; there would be no way of knowing without an examination by *kieme*.

"O.K.," I said, my voice cracking with fear of pain to come.

First, however, I would have to wait for ten minutes. The tweezers were not here at the clinic, but at the hospital. This upset me. Looking for a place to vent my tears, I went into the bathroom. Taking stock of my surroundings, I started to panic. Community

towel. Squat toilet. Water all over the floor. My face gone from tan to ghostly white since setting foot in this clinic.

When I came out of the bathroom, two middle-aged nurses in the hallway looked alarmed when they saw me crying. "Oh!" they exclaimed with delicate pity when they saw me, the tearful *farang*; they were responding almost as dramatically as I.

I took a seat in the lobby, watched a sensational ten minutes of a prime-time Thai soap opera that was complete with a hit-and-run accident, bloody wounds, and long, overacted scenes by aggrieved lovers. Poppy left the clinic to retrieve something from her nearby office. The young nurse waited outside on the sidewalk for the orderlies to return with the *kieme*. She fussed with her hair, tucking dark locks under her cardboard cap.

"What kind of clinic doesn't have a pair of tweezers?" I wondered, cursing myself for ever wanting to sleep on the floor in a *guti*. This earache had begun on day five of seven I spent trying to live like a Buddhist nun at a local temple. That seemed an eternity ago. Now, sitting in the crowded waiting room surrounded by dozens of curious Thai eyes, waiting for part two of this examination seemed eternal.

The tweezers arrived.

"*Bpa*," said the nurse, giving me the one-syllable "let's go." I followed dutifully, as if being led to the gallows pole.

"Please sit down," the doctor told me, a little anxious, it seemed, to get on with it.

I sat at his desk and braced myself. He plunged in again with the flashlight. The nurse assisted by tugging my earlobe to the floor and pulling the cartilaginous top portion

towards the back wall. The opening was made bigger. Doctor "Maybe" seized the tweezers and went in.

I heard the scraping, harrowing sound of the shaft of the tweezers being sent down a tube that had been inserted into my ear. At first, it didn't hurt at all, and I thought to myself that maybe "a little pain" was meant literally. Yet I sensed that the doctor's tweezers, deep in my ear, were on to something.

The *kieme* seized an object that felt foreign, yet attached, to the inside of my ear.

Pain. Pain. Pain. Just like the technique used in *vipassana* meditation, which I'd studied at the temple. If you feel pain, repeat the word to yourself until the pain disappears, as it eventually will.

Pain. Pain. Pain...

Out he came with something. "Leg: insect," the doctor said, holding up the bloody end of the tweezers, something small and straight between their grip.

Back in.

Pain. Pain. Pain. He scratched around some more, withdrew. "Wing: insect," he further substantiated. O.K., so he's not Doctor "Maybe." He's still Doctor *Kieme*, and are we done yet?

The pain, when he went in for a third try, was too intense, and I was starting to squirm, contorting further with every probe. It felt not that the doctor was removing a foreign object from the inside of my ear, but rather that he was removing the inside of my ear itself. He quickly stopped, and started communicating with the nurse in Thai.

"Here," he motioned to a white-sheeted bed, "sleep."

As if.

"Sleep, sleep," he said, trying, apparently, to get me in a prostrate position. All the better to *kieme* you with, my pretty.

"Sleep. Nurse get oil for ear. Too much blood."

The nurse and doctor left through the exam room door, which was propped open for anyone in the lobby to peer inside at the traumatized *farang*. I saw Poppy enter the clinic and look around for me.

Meanwhile, I lay on my side, good ear to the pillow, waiting for the oil, which was soon delivered via plunger syringe. Warm flood of new discomfort and the knowledge that the doctor would be re-entering soon with the tweezers. And, soon enough, he was.

Like an auger, Doctor *Kieme*'s tweezers penetrated the side of my head. I laid on the bed, curled into a fetal ball, crying as he dug and scraped. All I could see on the white wall in front of me was a string of creeping red ants. How I loathed them, their self-important parade of six— probably off to terrorize some innocent ear.

With each stab of the tweezers, I couldn't help but convulse and cry out, loudly. At last, the doctor retreated. Through the resounding throb of pain in my ear and through the oil, I could barely hear the muffled Thai of the doctor and Poppy, whose voice I could make out because of the lovely, understanding, "*kha*."

With this soft utterance, I knew that she was acknowledging what the doctor was saying to her. Though I wouldn't be able to understand his Thai monologue even without the insect and the oil, I would know what a long series of "*kha*"s meant. Poppy was being given many consecutive pieces of information. She was listening and, in her mind, translating in advance for me.

"Jen," said Poppy. I was still curled up, shaking and sniffling and wishing I'd stayed home in Alaska, where it's too cold for insects to threaten my hearing.

"*Bpa*, Jen. The doctor said he cannot remove the rest of the insect because of too much blood. You will go to Lamphun hospital on Saturday after blood has dried. They can take it out then."

I sat up, and the doctor said to me, "Have insect in ear. Cannot remove now because hematoma."

Get me out of here, please. Just give me some drugs and let me go, even if I'm only on parole. We sat in the waiting room while the prescriptions were filled. Tramadol, roxithromycin, some unmarked white pills, all in clear plastic bags.

Two hundred and eighty baht is all I had to pay for that? So much pain? Three prescriptions to boot, and it cost just over five dollars? So much for baht-pinching. Hey, can I go for more on Saturday? This is a bargain.

As I was leaving the clinic, the doctor told me reassuringly, "Not serious. *Sabbai maht*. Many cases in Thailand of insect in ear. You see, there are a lot of bugs here..."

*

Saturday: Although the antibiotic and the antihistamine brought down the swelling in my ear, I dreaded my one o'clock appointment to see the ENT (ear-nose-throat) doctor at Lamphun Memorial Hospital.

Would I need surgery? Would they have to rip out my timpanic membrane to get at the insect? Would I be able to hear again? Would they put more oil in my ear? Would they leave the examination room door open again? Would it be sanitary?

As we approached the hospital, walking slowly in the rain (I ~~was in no hurry~~ to meet with the doctor), I noticed a group of women sitting on a bamboo mat on the covered, U-shaped driveway. They were eating sticky rice and a spicy local chili paste called *nam prik*. Being, once again, the only *farang* in sight, they all looked up inquisitively as I passed. Poppy and I walked through the wide-open double door of the building.

Inside, the hospital was designed like one of those atrium hotels with an indoor pool at ground level. The seven-story building was wide open up through its core, with a ring of balconies on each floor, looking down to where the pool would be, or up to the ceiling, which was made of translucent corrugated plastic.

We registered at the reception desk, and waited, again in front of a TV. Many other patients sat in the corral of chairs. During a commercial break from "The Happy Family Show," one of the nurses came around, serving red punch to all of us in the waiting area. "Hospitality," I thought to myself, amused.

"Looks like blood," I remarked to Poppy, laughing.

"No, it is not blood," she replied seriously, "It is very sweet."

Still suffering from temporary loss of hearing, I didn't hear my name when it was called.

"*Bpa*, Jen. Go inside the doctor's room," instructed Poppy as she stood to accompany me.

"Good afternoon, please sit down," was the slightly more uptown greeting given to me by this hospital's ENT. "What is your problem?"

Certain that my "problem" was noted somewhere on the chart before him, I answered with the obvious: "I have an insect in my ear."

Within seconds my ear canal was full of his otoscope, and he was reaching for his tweezers.

Here we go again. I sat on the chair, assumed the position, and tried to steel myself for another round with the loathsome *kieme*.

But the doctor set his tweezers aside. He turned to a cart full of instruments and some kind of machinery. When he again faced me, he wielded a fine, sharp, pointed metal object that looked like it belonged not in my ear but in my mom's Christmas nutcracker set. I closed my eyes and tightened my grip on the edge of the desk.

The doctor, instead of piercing any part of my ear with this odious tool, turned and switched on a small generator that powered a tiny suction pump. He reached for a stainless steel vacuum wand, no bigger around than a toothpick, which looked much less threatening than either of the first two implements. I felt relatively safe from the potential

damage of suction— simple air— compared to scraping or puncture. The noisy little generator was unnerving, but overall I felt prepared for Round Two.

As the doctor vacuumed the inside of my ear, I felt as though I were stuck at the low end of a radio dial, inside the radio. Loud and staticky, the sound was really the most painful thing about this final portion of the exam. It didn't last long, either. Suck out a little dried blood, wipe the nozzle. More suction, wipe the nozzle. Extract various small bug parts, wipe and change the nozzle. And then, the doctor hit the jackpot.

A great, slurping, unclogging noise in my ear yielded the soggy viscera of this insect that had been stuck in my ear for a week now. Even partially decomposed, it was much larger than I had imagined, about the size of one of those tiny dried shrimp that are mixed in with *phad Thai* noodles.

"Is that the insect?!" I asked, desperate to hear that I was finally through this ordeal. It was over. Poppy looked at the bloody bug with gentle disgust; the doctor carried on, clinically, giving my ear a final probe with the otoscope. When he was finished, the three of us stared at the carcass, smeared on a tissue at the corner of the doctor's desk. Poppy cringed and said the Thai word for "long" under her breath: "*Yow...*"

After paying less than ten dollars for another prescription, we were on our way.

As Poppy drove us home, I felt immense relieved, as if, well, as if I'd just had an insect removed from my ear. Remembering the place where the bug and I first met, at the

temple, I said to Poppy, "There are 200 people living at the temple. That's 400 ears. Why do you think the bug chose mine to crawl into?"

"I think it knows you are *farang*," she said, laughing. "Because the Thais, they protect their ears, no? Maybe they put some cotton in, or wear a hat."

Later, Poppy's husband, Johnny, said I should begin my story of the bug with, "I once had a pet. I tried to keep it in my ear. I thought I could feed it, but it died..."

Appendix

RECIPES FOR AN *ISSAN* BANQUET AT HOME

Spicy Papaya Salad
*(Som-tam)**

A cold salad with a following. This tangy Northeastern specialty has a national allegiance in Thailand, beginning with the royal family. The country's Princess Phra Tep proclaims her love for the dish in a sweet, lyrical song devoted to *som-tam*.

Ingredients:

10 small green chili peppers (sometimes sold as "birdseye chilies")
3 garlic cloves, peeled
2 long beans ("snake beans") or 5 string beans
7 oz. green, unripe papaya, peeled and grated into thin strips (or, try cucumber and carrot)
2 tbsp. fish sauce
2 tbsp. lemon or lime juice
1 tbsp. anchovy paste
1 tbsp. dried shrimp
raw beans and cabbage
1 tsp. palm sugar (brown sugar may be substituted)
6 cherry tomatoes, halved and seeded
2 tbsp. roasted, unsalted peanuts

Method:

- Put the chilies and peeled garlic into a mortar; roughly pound.
- Add the beans and papaya (or its substitute) and pound again to bruise the ingredients. Then add the fish sauce, lemon or lime juice, and sugar; pound more.
- Add the anchovy sauce, tomatoes, dried shrimp, and peanuts; pound to combine.
- Serve with sticky rice (recipe follows) and fresh, raw beans and cabbage wedges.

Notes:

- The sticky rice and the cabbage are traditionally used in place of an eating utensil, though a (shared) soup spoon is set on the plate for those who prefer to scoop.
- Use the pestle only to bruise the ingredients— do not pound too much.
- Serves two.

"Issan" Spicy Minced Chicken Salad
*(Laap Gai)**

Throughout Thailand's Northeast, you'll hear the sound of cleavers striking rhythmically against tamarind tree chopping blocks. Thais often mince the meat for *laap* with a cleaver in each hand. Whether you prepare this dish using chicken or pork, with one cleaver or two, make sure that the meat is very finely minced.

Ingredients:

11 oz. finely minced raw chicken
4 shallots, thinly sliced
2 slices of ginza or ginger, finely chopped
3 tbsp. fish sauce
2 tbsp. lemon or lime juice
1 tbsp. dried, ground chilli peppers
2 tbsp. fresh coriander (also known as cilantro), finely chopped
1 green onion, chopped
1 tbsp. fresh mint leaves, chopped
2 tbsp. ground, roasted sticky rice (see directions below)
a few mint leaves for garnish
a selection of fresh vegetables including: "snake" or string beans, cabbage, lettuce, spinach, and cucumber

Method:

- Put the meat, shallots, ginza or ginger, fish sauce, lemon or lime juice, and ground chilies into a bowl. Mix thoroughly.
- Heat a wok over medium heat, and cook the meat mixture for about five minutes or until meat is done.
- Transfer the cooked mixture into a bowl. Add coriander, green onion, chopped mint leaves, and ground, roasted sticky rice.
- Mix well. Serve garnished with mint leaves and fresh vegetables.

Notes:

- To make ground, roasted sticky rice, put 1/8 c. of uncooked glutinous rice into a dry wok over low heat. Roast the grains until they become brown, stirring often. Then put the roasted rice into a mortar and pound into powder.
- Pork can be substituted for chicken.
- This dish is typically served and eaten with sticky rice (recipe follows).
- Serves two.

"Issan" Grilled Chicken
(Gai Yang Issan)

Simple grilled chicken, flavored with an *Issan* marinade— coriander, lemongrass, and garlic— will redefine this backyard barbeque staple. A Northeastern favorite, *gai yang* wouldn't be complete without *som-tam* and sticky rice. For an authentic eating experience, serve grilled chicken with "Spicy Anchovy Dip."

Ingredients:
2 lbs. chicken— whole or pieces
⅓ c. chopped coriander
⅓ c. chopped lemongrass (use only the lower third of the stalk)
9 garlic cloves, peeled
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. white pepper

Method:
- If using a whole chicken, clean and split lengthwise. Remove skin, if desired.
- Combine remaining ingredients in large bowl and marinate chicken in this mixture overnight.
- Grill chicken over low heat for twenty minutes on each side. If using a charcoal grill, start fire thirty minutes prior to cooking.
- Serve with "Spicy Anchovy Dip" and sticky rice (recipes follow).

Notes:
- Serves four.

Spicy Anchovy Dip
(Nam Prik Jaew)

The rich, salty dip gets its zing from roasted lemongrass and tamarind juice. Serve as an accompaniment to "*Issan* Grilled Chicken."

Ingredients:
2 c. water
8 oz. anchovy, fresh, frozen, or canned (if using canned, drain oil)
8 garlic gloves, peeled
¼ c. roasted lemongrass, coarsely chopped (use only lower third of stalk; lemongrass can be roasted over stove top or other flame; measure amount after roasting)
¼ c. shallots, coarsely chopped
⅓ c. ginza or ¼ c. or less ginger, coarsely chopped
10 - 15 small, green chili peppers (sometimes sold as "birdseye chilies")
½ c. tamarind juice
2 tbsp. fish sauce

Method:
- Boil water in medium saucepan. Add fish and boil for five minutes. Reserve at least ½ c. of stock.
- Pound garlic, lemongrass, shallots, ginza or ginger, and chili peppers in a mortar until finely ground.
- Add ½ c. of strained fish stock, tamarind juice, and fish sauce to mortar. Mix well.
- Serve with "*Issan* Grilled Chicken" as a dipping sauce.

Notes:
- If tamarind juice is not available, use tamarind paste diluted with water.

Sticky Rice
(Khao Neeow)

The glutinous variety virtually replaces plain rice throughout Thailand's North and Northeast. Used in place of a utensil, sticky rice is eaten with the hands. Simply roll it into a ball and start dipping.

Cooking Utensils:

— Large pot for boiling at least three quarts of water
— Steamer basket (with some type of lid) which fits snugly into the top of the pot. If steamer has large holes, it must be lined with muslin to prevent rice from falling through.
— Large plate for cooling rice

Ingredients:

Sticky rice— about one uncooked cup per person— and water

Method:

- In bowl, cover rice with water and soak overnight.
- Drain rice and put into steamer basket placed atop pot of water. Bottom of basket should be three to six inches above the water.
- Bring water to a boil, uncovered; turn rice occasionally to ensure even cooking.
- When steam is seen coming through rice, place lid on basket and cook for five to seven minutes, stirring rice occasionally.
- When cooked, rice grains will not be hard in the middle.
- Turn rice out onto a slightly wet plate to cool. Stir to release steam. Store quickly, or rice will dry out.

Notes:

- Sticky rice is also known as "glutinous" or "sweet" rice.
- Don't use utensils to eat sticky rice! Using one hand, roll a small amount of rice into a ball, and dip. "Double dipping" is considered impolite.
- Cooked sticky rice can be stored in a covered basket or vented foil; it will keep for about 12 hours, unrefrigerated.
- Many Asian groceries sell steamer baskets. However, if cooking utensils are unavailable, some Thai restaurants sell plain, cooked sticky rice.

"Issan" Shrimp Salad
(Pla Goong)

Another fresh, cold salad from Thailand's Northeast. Don't overcook the shrimp— just blanch them or they'll dull the dish. Lively Thai herbs, chilies, and citrus enliven this simple salad.

Ingredients:
2 c. water
1 lb. shrimp, peeled and deveined
2 stalks of lemongrass, chopped (use only the lower third of the stalk)
2 tbsp. green onion, chopped
5 kaffir lime leaves, torn into pieces, with stems removed
⅓ c. mint leaves
1 tbsp. fresh coriander (also known as cilantro) leaves, chopped
1 tsp. dried, ground chilies
¼ c. fish sauce
¼ c. lemon or lime juice

Method:
- In a large saucepan, bring two cups of water to a boil and then add shrimp. Being careful not to overcook shrimp, blanch them for thirty seconds to one minute and remove to bowl.
- Add lemongrass, green onion, and lime, mint, and coriander leaves.
- Sprinkle ground chilies over mixture, then add fish sauce and lemon or lime juice.
- Toss gently, then serve.

Notes:
- Serves four.
- Kaffir lime leaves are for flavor only, avoid eating them (they're bitter). If kaffir lime leaves are unavailable, substitute 2½ tsp. grated lemon or lime rind.

Stir-fried Chicken with Holy Basil
*(Phad Kaprow Gai)**

A flavorful recipe that has its origins in Chinese cooking. Although not a Northern or Northeastern specialty, *phad kaprow gai* is great with sticky rice. Heed the warning about making this dish in a well-ventilated kitchen!

Ingredients:
4 tbsp. black soy sauce ("black" soy is thicker and sweeter than the common variety)
3 tbsp. soy sauce
3 tbsp. whiskey or white wine
3 tbsp. fish sauce
4 tbsp. cooking oil
1 lb. finely chopped chicken
8 garlic cloves, peeled
15 - 20 small, green chili peppers (sometimes sold as "birdseye chilies")
6 tbsp. water
1 - 2 tbsp. cooking oil
1 c. fresh holy basil (has a purple stem and leaves), chopped into medium-sized pieces
1 large red chili pepper, thinly sliced cross-wise

Method:
- Mix soy sauces, whiskey or wine, and 4 tbsp. oil. Add meat and toss together.
- Marinate meat for at least two hours.
- Pound garlic and chili peppers together in mortar. Remove, then rinse mortar with 6 tbsp. water. Set this water aside for later use.
- Ventilate cooking area (to avoid watering eyes and sneezing from all the chili peppers!), then heat 1 - 2 tbsp. oil in a wok.
- Add the garlic and chili mixture to wok, then add chicken. Stir chicken to break up into pieces, and cook until nearly done.
- Add basil and chili/garlic water to wok.
- Toss in sliced red chili, and serve with plain, cooked rice.

Notes:
- Serves four.
- Chicken may be substituted with pork, beef, lamb, shrimp, tofu, or mushrooms.

Water Chestnuts With Sugar Syrup and Coconut Milk
*(Tab Tim Grob)**

With the endearing translated name of "crunchy rubies," who could resist this unusual dessert? Red-tinted water chestnuts are the surprising gems in this refreshing finale.

Ingredients:

Dessert—
½ c. water
½ tsp. red food coloring
4 c. water
¼ c. tapioca flour

Sugar Syrup—
½ c. sugar
½ c. water
½ c. thick coconut milk
Crushed ice

Method:

- In a medium saucepan, soak water chestnuts in ½ c. water and red food coloring. Let sit for twenty minutes.
- As water chestnuts take on red color, make the sugar syrup. Put sugar and water into a saucepan. When sugar has dissolved, bring water to a boil for two minutes.
- Put the four cups of water into a pan and bring to a boil. Drain water chestnuts and roll each one in tapioca flour.
- Once water is boiling, drop chestnuts into the water and leave for two minutes or until they float. Then, remove them and place into a bowl of cold water.
- To serve, place water chestnuts into individual clear glass bowls and spoon over with sugar syrup and coconut milk.
- Add a handful of crushed ice to each dish, and serve immediately.

Notes:

- Serves four for dessert.
- Melon chunks may be added to the water chestnuts. Prepare them in same manner.
- The canned, sliced variety may be substituted for quartered water chestnuts.

Recipes marked with an asterisk appear courtesy of Somphon and Elizabeth Nabnian, Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School. For course information, write to the school at 1 - 3 Moon Muang Road, Chiang Mai, 50200 THAILAND.

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